WESTERN ACTION

JUNE, 1945
15¢

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MOST RUPTURED MEN CAN WORK AGAIN!

If you, because of rupture, are suffering the agonies of enforced idleness, while all about you men and women are working with all their energies to help win victory, by all means learn about the Brooks patented Air-cushion Rupture Appliance. It has brought comfort, happiness and restored working ability to many thousands of ruptured men and women. If yours is a reducible rupture, regardless of its size or location, we honestly believe the Brooks Appliance will give you an opportunity to work again. In fact, we are so confident of it that we take all the chances . . . you risk nothing.

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The Brooks Appliance is never sold in stores or by agents. You buy it direct from us at the low "maker-to-user" price. Every Brooks Appliance is individually made to meet the user's own particular requirements. The Brooks positively has no hard pads, clamps or steel springs to chafe or irritate. The Brooks Air-cushion truss-rupture support helps nature hold the weakened muscles gently but firmly. It costs nothing to get complete details. Why not try for a more comfortable life through the Brooks care of rupture?

FREE Latest Rupture Book explains all. It will be sent to you, free, in plain envelope. Just fill in, clip and mail the coupon below. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate our no-risk trial offer. Learn what this marvelous invention may do for you—send coupon quick.

PROOF!

In our files in Marshall, Michigan, we have over 44,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.

A Carpenter writes:
"Perfect satisfaction from the first day. . . . I do not know I have it on. It is a God-send to me." D. A. Prater, Dallas, Texas.

A Railway Engineer writes:
"I feel very much pleased with my truss purchased from you. I don't know how I could experience any more comfort and safety." Thos. D. Adams, Adams, Wisconsin.

An Iron Worker writes:
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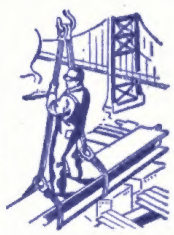

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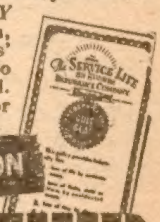

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WESTERN ACTION

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

VOLUME 9 JUNE, 1945 NUMBER 6

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

FIVE GRAVES TO GUNSMOKE.....By T. W. Ford 10

Four rival parties sought the secret of the graves along the gunsmoke trail, and the treasure at the end of it, four rival expeditions. But the most dangerous man of all was Hombre Kirby, a one-man fifth party!

SHORT STORIES

GUN TRAIL TO ADVENTURE ..... by Ralph Berard 83

Any town at all was too tame for Jeff Gordon!

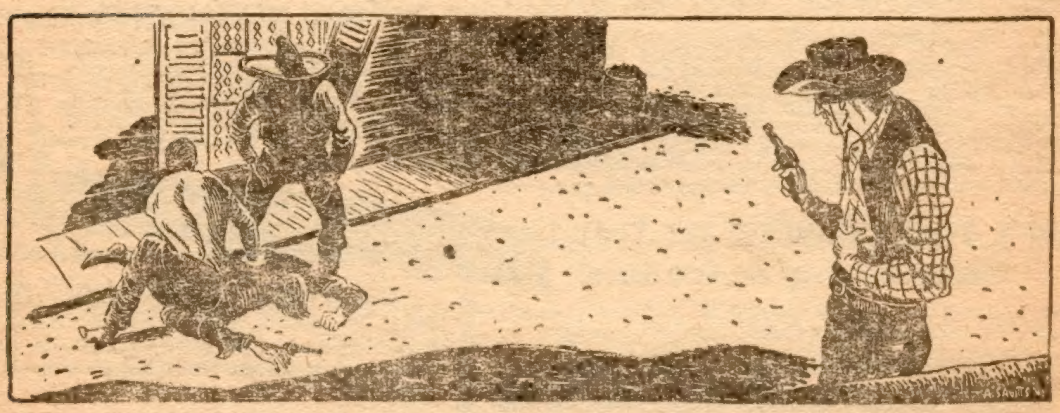
THE SLAUGHTER KID ..... By Lee Thomas 90

A true story of a minor outlaw—whose bullets were just as deadly as those of any of the better known badmen.

YELLOW BELLY ..... By Joe Payne 96

The kid showed promise as a lawman—then turned tail on his first assignment.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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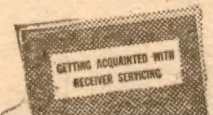

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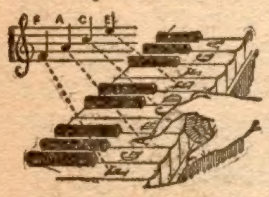

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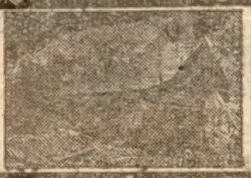

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FIVE GRAVES

An Action-Packed, Complete

HEADED for wealth like a drunkard's dream, Patch McQuade rode around a bend in the Rocky Forks trail and got his light put out.

When it happened, Patch was riding with his half brother, Gene McQuade, and George Cronkhite, his trusted lieutenant. Cronkhite was rotund, soft-faced, with walrus mus-

They said a fabulous treasure lay at the end of the Gunsmoke Trail, and the key lay in a map which had been slashed into five sections, each piece cached in a different grave. And four separate parties of desperate men sought the graves—four parties who had one other thing than greed for gold in common: their fear of the fifth, a gent called Hombre Kirby!

TO GUNSMOKE

New book-length Novel

By T. W. Ford

(Author of "Owlhoot Triggers For The Law," "The Silver Kid" novels, etc.)

taches. When one got to know him better, one realized that this was just the kind of a face the dangerous Cronkhite would have picked for himself had the choice been his. The trail was still damp with morning dew and Cronkhite kept shooting nervous glances back. Patch and Gene McQuade chuckled at him.

"Don't worry 'bout them, George," Patch told him around his cigar. "Wait'll we hit up the Gunsmoke trail to that cached gold and—"

And then the other rider stepped into sight from behind a boulder at the opening of a cut off the trail. He was lean, with rangy stooped shoulders and a raw-boned face, bleak with resolve. "Reach, Patch!" he ordered, voice like a buckskin popper on a bull whip. "Grab yourself a hunk of sky and—" He spat it over a pair of levelled .45's.

"Hombre. . . Hombre Kirby. . ." gasped Patch McQuade. Then he went for the .38 in the shoulder rig beneath his coat. A man facing the hangman will battle if he gets a chance, after all, he's got nothing to lose. Patch didn't need to ask any questions; he knew what Hombre Kirby was there for. Somehow, the Hombre always seemed to know everything.

So Patch tried to fence off Death. It was a puny gesture. The Hombre's bullet tore off the little finger of the hand going for the hideout gun. Smashed on into chest bone, through it, deflecting slightly to sever the aorta leading from the left ventricle of the heart. Patch McQuade was a dead man before he cleared saddle leather.

THE SMALLER Gene fired twice before he twisted his roan off into the brush. He left the kak, lit running and fired again, the bullet just clearing the half-crouched Kirby by inches. Plump George Cronkhite was already down and behind a boulder, trying for a finisher shot. Darting sideward on spidery legs in close-fitting gray pants, Kirby jumped a slug off the top of the rock above him. Cronkhite's gun jerked from sight as he scrounged lower, and Gene McQuade's hardware hammered out from the brush at the other side of the trail.

"Work on him, Cronk!" Gene bawled as he called the Hombre a fatherless son of a dog. But there was frantic desperation behind it; Gene remembered warning Patch to make sure that that old drunken fool of a One-Foot Hope was dead. It had been from One-Foot they'd extracted the secret of the Gunsmoke Trail. Patch knew Gene had been right, now—if he knew anything where he was.

McQuade could hardly believe his luck when he saw it happen: one of Cronkhite's snapshots caromed off a stone in the trail, angled and sliced open Hombre Kirby's cheek. It wasn't really a wound, Gene saw that by the fact the Hombre didn't rock back. But blood spurted up into one of his eyes and he had to jump into the cut.

It was Gene's chance. Leaving the brush, he darted to his brother's body and ripped open the shirt, tore out a small flat parcel wrapped in oilskin. Diving back into the brush, he threw himself into the saddle. He flung the gut-hooks to the roan, and went up the slope on the other side of the trail, preparing to loop around and swing for Rocky Forks, just over the creek beyond the bend. Not for him the open trail with that devil, Hombre Kirby, on his coat tails. In town he might find some safety.

HE NEVER made it. He figured Kirby would have to handle Cronkhite before daring to ride from the cut under George Cronkhite's guns, but Gene underestimated The Hombre's reckless nerve. In scarce a minute, Kirby came busting the breeze on his black mare out of the cut and turned toward town, ignoring Cronkhite's fire. And somehow, though Cronkhite was a dead shot, Kirby escaped unscathed.

Gene had to cut down from the slope to get to the shallow ford of the creek to cross. Above, it ran between steep cut banks. He came down, rid-

ing for his life. Twenty yards from the water, he looked over a shoulder. That damned devil, The Hombre, was pounding out of the curve. Gene twisted his pony around and levelled a cutter to try to get him. Instead, a chunk of lead drew a burning finger along Gene McQuade's ribs.

Swinging from the hull, once again he ran for the cover of the brush. Crouched in it he rose and shot once more. The tell-tale muzzle flame spiking from the foliage was his undoing. His shot was answered, but he never heard the report following the bullet that arrowed through the side of his brain.

In the saddle of his reined-up horse, Kirby twisted around. Cronkhite sat his pony back up the curve. Cronkhite saw Gene was finished and sent his animal driving up through the brush to get the hell out of there. He went southward. Kirby didn't bother taking after him; he knew that Gene McQuade had "the thing" on him. Cronkhite was unimportant.

Hombre Kirby started to swing his leg from the hull, sleeving again at the blood running from his leathery cheek. But he heard, then saw, riders coming down the other slope from the town to the creek. The gunshots had drawn them. Running hairpins trailed the horsemen. The Hombre hesitated but a moment. Being who he was, he might have trouble explaining the killing; and anyway, those folks wouldn't understand what they found on Gene McQuade. Few people in the world would.

With a mocking salute to the men across the stream, Hombre Kirby sent the coal-black mare bolting back around the bend from sight. When he turned off, it was to go northward toward Masalla and the start of the Gunsmoke Trail. . .

The townsmen carried in the bodies of Gene McQuade and Patch, his half brother. Nobody could understand the shooting at all. A search showed that neither body had been robbed. They laid them out on old doors in the back of the big gambling hall and folks filed by for a look. A sad-faced man with walrus mustaches was in the line. When he was told to pull off his hat, he revealed thin long black oilly hair. A choked sound broke from him as he bent over the bodies.

"My old friend, Robbie! Good ol' Robbie! H-his-his pore wife." He bent, clasping the shoulders of the dead Gene McQuade, leaning over the chest. Out of respect for his grief, the townsmen moved back. When George Cronkhite moved back from the body, he had the thing in the oilskin pouch under his shirt. Patch and Gene hadn't let him in on the thing completely, but he knew the paper was a list of five places up the Gunsmoke Trail. Each of the five places was something, and when put together, these five things would be the key to that fabulous chunk of dinero Patch and Gene had been planning to get.

When he left town, George Cronkhite made for Masalla too. . . The McQuades had been headed for there.

CHAPTER II

AS THEY moved down the corridor of the second-floor of the Masalla Palace Hotel, old Montana Hannan suddenly became a statue. One of his veined gnarled hands snapped out and grabbed Miss Barbara's arm to freeze her in her tracks. Outside, the evening wind soughed around the big wooden building.

"You leave your window open, ma'm?" he asked, whispering in that cracked half husky voice of his. The thinned-out spikes of white hair seemed to bristle from his bullet-shaped head. His sawed-off broad-as-a-barn-door body tilted forward on the balls of his feet as he hooked out an old Colts. Pushing her gently against a wall, he glided to the door of the girl's room, face impassive. She had already shaken her head in answer to his question.

But he had heard that door click faintly against its loose-fitting latch. Many another hombre of sixty odd years like Montana would have gone for help. But the stubborn-

mouthed, soft-eyed old-timer who had been segundo on the ranch of Miss Barbara's grandfather had never backed water for anything short of the Devil. And he didn't expect to then when he met up with him.

Silently maneuvering the key into the door, he twisted, eased it open. The lamp on the corner table was lighted and turned discreetly low. And the dimity curtains blew back in the strong draft from the open window. Montana was over there in a split second, cautiously poking his head out. He saw a hunched-over figure sliding over the end of the roof of the back porch of the hotel, then the man's cream-hued Stetson was gone in the twilight.

WHERE Barbara Sebolt's safety was endangered, old Montana was as dangerous as a starved lobo. He went out on the roof and padded silently after the man. If somebody was interested in the girl's pasear up the Gunsmoke Trail, Montana meant to know who and why.

Dropping from the end of the porch himself, he saw the intruder ducking around the horse shed back in the rear. For an elderly man, the bow-legged Montana Hannan was remarkably agile. Hauling out a cutter again, he cut down the distance to the shed, gliding into the shadow of the overhanging cottonwoods. Turning the corner of the shed to the right, he saw a quick fluid movement from the high grass on his left. But as he wheeled, the leaping man's gun chopped down.

Montana jerked his white head and shoulder from the path of the blow, but the gun barrel slammed numbingly into his gun arm. His weapon fell from powerless fingers. His other hand, though, shot out and he pinioned the wrist of his assailant's gun hand. Their bodies thudded together in the sultry night. They grappled, the other apparently averse to firing.

When they went down, old Montana was beneath. Then he had a Bowie blade from his boot. Very neatly he inserted it between two ribs, oblivious to the fist-pounding he was taking in the face. The figure atop him jerked convulsively, gave a long-drawn "Ah-h-h" and rolled to one side. Montana bent over him, cupping a match in his hand.

The man was dead, red-rimmed eyes already glazing over. No chance of getting anything out of him. He was shabbily garbed, brown-headed, face gutted with the ravages of heavy drinking, plainly a saloon tough. After running over him to see if he'd taken anything from the girl's room, Montana rose and spat into the grass beside the body. Then he went back to the hotel, entering by a rear door.

Up in the hall, Barbara awaited him with a .32 hanging by her side, hidden in the folds of her riding skirt. When she asked him if he'd found anything, Montana shrugged.

"Fella," he said succinctly. "Don't reckon he'll be back."

"I didn't hear any shots, Montana."

He shook his hair-spiked skull. "No, no shots. Maybe we should git outa town pretty dang fast, hey? Maybe we should go back home—"

But she was already shaking her head. "We're going up the Gunsmoke. . . At least, I am," she said, resolve dropping her voice an octave.

IN THE room, he spread his work-calloused hands. "But, you see, Miss Barbara. You see. Back at the stage-line division depot, you heard that drummer talking about the Gunsmoke Trail and you ask him if he was up it lately. Then we come in here and you grab the saddle bag away from the boy who is taking our horses because the bag, she has the Gunsmoke graves map. Somebody hears and sees these things and. . ." He pointed around at the open window and her possessions that had been slung about by the intruder in his feverish search.

She shrugged. "I have the map of the graves—here," she tapped the silk blouse over her bosom. "And I'm going through." She was small,

sloe-eyed but with the hint of a fierce flame ready to whip to life within. Dark glistening hair with an almost bluish quality fell from beneath her sombrero over the maroon shirt on her slim shoulders. Her oval of face was olive-skinned, betokening the blood of a Spanish grandmother old Myles Sebolt had brought out from California.

She had a curiously boyish way of moving though her slim body had taken on the first curves of full bloom. Montana's faded eyes took in all those things as he watched her move about; he worshipped the ground she walked on.

"But a woman going up that trail," he started to protest weakly again. "Why, it—"

Nostrils flaring, she whipped about on him, anger staining her Cameo-like face a darker hue. "One of my grandmothers came out on the old Oregon trail in a Conestoga wagon—and drove the last five hundred miles herself with grandpa lying helpless with the ague. Well?"

Old Montana shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He never had been much of a hand at tongue-wagging at best. "Well. . ."

"Well—yourself! If she could do it, I can. Grandpa Sebolt mortgaged his ranch to the ears and went up the Gunsmoke after that treasure, whatever it was. He died trying and lies in one of those five graves out there. He—"

Montana was shaking his head again. "It was a locoed idee even then, Miss Barbara. It—"

"Grandpa Sebolt was no fool, Montan; you know that. He loved the old Running-S. No, he must have known—*known* there was something up there. He raised money to buy in on the party. Then," her voice dropped, "he died; all of them were supposed to have died. We never heard any more—not until Mr Hope came."

Montana made a mouth. "A whisky-loving tinhorn, if you're asking my opinion, as you ain't."

"Maybe he did like a drink. But he had known Fentriss, the only one of the party to get out, Montan. And he gave us the layout of the five graves up the Gunsmoke as Fentriss outlined them to him."

"Awright, awright. But it still ain't no fitten place for a filly like you to go. Mind my word, they's a-going to be trouble fixing along the Gunsmoke again. Now—"

HER mouth curved downward discouragedly for but a brief moment, then she locked his eyes with hers. "All right, suppose there is. I can take care of myself. As grand-daughter of Myles Sebolt, I've got a stake in what's at the end of it. Look, Montan. Look at what the family's come to now." Dropping on the end of the table, man-fashion, her long fingers plucked at the braiding of her quirt.

"Grandfather Sebolt hoped to build a range dynasty. He wanted the brand to stay in the family—and the family to be big back on the Horsehead Range. And what's happened?"

"I know. I know. But—"

"When Grandpa didn't come back, Pop lost the ranch. Then his business in town went with his death. Now, Ma's working herself into a grave trying to make the boarding house pay. Sue's thinking of marrying that fish-faced Stan Tannen who owns the store because it would take the family out of the hole."

Montana nodded. "Yup. He's older'n a mosshorn and—"

She struck at furniture angrily with her quirt as she strode about. "You won't admit it, too, but I know Bob's been riding out at night to talk to some of the Red Hollow Bunch boys. He's desperate, too. And Arthur over at the bank—well, I smelled a rat just in time when he started to gamble. I made him put back the few dollars he filched from his accounts at the bank. . . But—well, there'll be a next time; and it'll be bigger."

"He didn't mean no real harm," Montana put in.

"State Prison is full of men who didn't mean any *real* harm," she flicked back cynically. "No, they're all desperate, the whole family. . . Struggling hopelessly with the mill-

stone of old debts bogging them down. . . No. There's only one answer, Montana. I'm going up the Gunsmoke Trail. . . If you don't want to come. . ."

He glowered so she wanted to laugh. "Awright, Miss Smarty Tongue! Awright. Don't have no sense! Don't stand hitched! But if we're going, it's in my mind we should quit this town tonight." He was thinking of the dead man in the back yard, and the fact that another attempt might be made against the girl.

The headstrong Barbara Sebolt's mouth softened in a teasing little-girl smile as she got her way. "*Anything* you say, Montan."

A couple of hours later, they rode down Massalla's main road and turned a corner into a side street straggling out to the north. On the corner was a gambling hell, "Ruby Priest's Hall of Chance" as its sign proclaimed it. It was boarded up, a heavy padlock dangling at the double doors. "Closed" was scrawled in charcoal across one of the doors.

"Don't reckon nobody really knows what we're aiming for," Montana Hannan allowed, snugging a gun deeper into a holster, as they passed the place. . .

* * *

In a windowless interior room of the *Hall of Chance,* Ruby Priest made dust jump from the table with a blow of his huge white fist. "Hell with the odds! I'm a gambler, ain't I? I'm going up the Gunsmoke. The stake's big enough for any risk, by grab!"

CHAPTER III

HATCHET-FACED, bony-bodied Con Chopper lifted his eyes from the tube of Durham he was fashioning. Those eyes were like stones, dirty-gray colored ones, in his cadaverous head. Nobody had ever seen Chopper smile; he wore a graven sadness like another man might have worn a beard or a mustache. He was Ruby Priest's bodyguard, sometimes called his "Shadow."

"You got a craving to git your chips cashed, Ruby?" he said quietly. "You know that damn marshal from the governor's office is still snooping around this piece of country."

"Sure. A-wearing his pony bow-legged a-trying to cut my sign and find what trail I lit out by! Only I didn't run! Haw-haw!" Tilting back in his chair, he guffawed away so loudly the others didn't need to laugh. Priest was a hulk of man, tall and drum-chested, a man of contrasts. A big bony spike of nose projected like a hinge from his wide florid face, but the eyes flanking the nose were small, a dull gray. He had a big, heavy-lipped mouth; the teeth inside it were small and short.

He wore a black frock coat, but the trousers beneath it were a flamboyant pearl gray and his vest was beflowered with figures of red and yellow. His white shirt was absolutely plain and worn with no necktie. But smack in the middle of the bosom was a big glowering ruby, the thing that had given him his name, a name he had taken as his regular one. Never was he seen without it; some men swore he wore it even on his nightshirt. He was always touching it with hands that were paste-white and small and almost dainty in comparison to his big frame.

"Yeah, I stayed right plumb smack here. Last place that Corrigan—" That was the special marshal. "—would uh thought of looking for me." He laughed some more and broke off to down his three fingers of whisky. But the wan eyes were measuring them, Chopper and the other pair, his house gunmen. At least, they had been when he was operating the place.

The eyes flickered angrily. "Are you brainless trigger slammers losing your nerve?" he demanded. Maybe he got mad because he wasn't quite so sure of himself any more. He had lost his temper that way the night the cattle buyer from K. C. had caught him burning a card from the bottom. The eyes had flickered above the suave smile frozen to his face; and he had

hauled a gun and drilled the man twice dead center.

Of course, it had been a tough break that the dead cattle buyer had a relative who happened to be a big potato in political circles up in the capital. It made it more than just a local affair that Ruby Priest could have handled, and this Corrigan, the special marshal, had sloped in. The place was closed down.

It was quite a price to pay for a single uncontrollable spate of temper; Priest knew that. Usually he figured things coldly and then acted.

"NOT LOSING our nerve," Chopper answered for them all. "Nope, not by a danged sight. But we ain't gone locoed neither. You hit the trail to Gunsmoke and that special marshal's a-going to be riding your tracks right pronto. Then—trouble."

"We aim to see what the percentage is afore we take more chances," one of the others said, a man with the pinky finger of his right hand missing.

Priest looked around, elbows hunched up on the table. "You'd just rather squat here a-mildewing away, the place shut up and all. Well, by grab, I ain't that kind of a—"

Chopper broke in without lifting his voice. "Lou Hackett's already said he'd buy you out. I reckon, too, we could arrange to git your dinero from the bank—at gun point. Then we could pull stakes and set up somewheres else where you ain't known."

Lips curling back, Ruby Priest made a spitting sound. "Yah! Go somewheres else; squat and sweat and wonder when that damn Corrigan picks up the scent. And worry about somebody recognizing us and passin' along the word. No! Not for me; I'm a high roller. I'm shooting for big stakes or nothing!" He splashed out a fresh slug of redeye. "You gents want to take a runout—all right with me!"

Beebe, the one with the missing finger, fussed nervously. "We ain't craving to quit you, Ruby. But—"

The wind shook the big place, and a stray draft extinguished the match Priest was putting to a tailor-made cigaret. He swore softly, scratching another. "Hell, Con! I thought you come to Masalla and hunkered down to find out who killed Red, your brother."

The stones of eyes in Chopper's head became hooded. "Uh-huh. Maybe I did, but I don't aim to git my own hide tacked to the wall a-horsing up Gunsmoke Trail after Gawd-knows-what?"

"'Gawd-knows-what!'" Priest mocked. "Only probably the biggest pot we ever played for! 'S all! Just—"

Stucky, the third gunman, palmed his moon of yellowish face. "All right. You tell us what it is, huh? What exactly is it?"

"Sure," added Con Chopper. "A gopher walks in with a locoed story 'bout—"

"Locoed? You're the locoed ones! Why—" Nobody else had heard or sensed anything. Yet, stopping his talk, Priest was already up noiselessly from his chair, and he levered a Colts from one of the black scabbards at his thighs with a gliding motion that seemed effortless.

CHOPPER wheeled off his chair and fitted his cadaverous body into a corner behind the door. He didn't draw. His right holster was rigged on a swivel and open-tipped. He heeled down on the butt and had the muzzle covering a man. Seconds passed and then knuckles rattled the door. One of the former bartenders of the *Hall of Chance* came in at Priest's call.

"He wants to know if you've made up your mind yet," the drink wrangler said, thumbing over his shoulder. Up there in the front of the dim place they could see the figure seated at one of the green baize-topped card tables.

"Tell him to keep his britches on," Priest ordered. When the door closed, he reseated himself, brushing quirly ash from his frock coat. "And that gent, Sommers out there—his story ain't locoed!"

Chopper made an impatient gesture. "Naw, naw, not at all. Who the

devil is he, anyways? Nothing but a two-bit tinhorn from down Cayuse River way. Half a cut above a mangy horse-thief with a crazy story of—"

"Brush your hackles down, Con," Priest ordered. "And bend an ear. Sure, Sommers is just a lowdown monte dealer; I could buy him with what I carry in my vest pocket. He's small-bore all right, and no brains. But — he — has — got — a — map — of — the — four — graves — along — the — Gunsmoke." He accented each word with a thump of his fist.

"And just exactly what is up the Gunsmoke?" Stucky said again, polishing his chin.

Priest sucked in his breath as his temper welled afresh. "Some gophers cain't see further'n their hat brims!"

"All I know is," put in Beebe, "that this gent walks in with his yarn and wants five thousand on the line and a third what we git when we go up there. But nobody's saying what we git! Now—"

"Up the head of the Gunsmoke is Leadville, and the lead vein there run out years back," said Stucky. "It's a ghost town now."

"Keep up the chin-wagging. But a man never learned nothing that way; no more'n a jackass who can't hear nothing but his own braying!"

"All right, Ruby," Chopper said, with a sign to the rest.

PRIEST sneered. "I knew the story of the Gunsmoke before Sommers ever drifted in. That's why I ain't calling it a crazy man's yarn. It was years back, thirty or forty odd. Never did know exactly. . , . But this party went up the Gunsmoke. They had some secret information about a terrific cache up there at the end of the Gunsmoke. They—"

"A cache? Who put it there?" demanded Chopper.

"Well, the story was that it was a cache. Nobody knows exactly—well, exactly what it was. A man called Dal Fentriss was the leader of the party. Now, listen to this. Fentriss had a spread over Yucca Valley way; this was a territory then, and that outfit of his was the biggest in the territory, the old Split Stirrup. Yet he left it, practically threw up everything, to hit the Gunsmoke." He paused to draw on his cigaret.

"I heard tell of the old Split Stirrup," admitted Stucky. "They say he had a hacienda for a ranch-house and it was big as a castle afore it burnt down. Had about fifty servants on the place. Yeah. . ."

Priest went on, bits of eyes dreamy. "Fentriss was the head man. There were others. One of 'em, a gent named Sebolt, he mortgaged all he had to put up 'bout ten thousand to buy in on a share of this thing."

"Ten thousand?" said Chopper. "That ain't cow chips."

"You're spitting, it ain't! And not back in them days, by a damn sight, especially. Them things, I know. There were others in the outfit, like I said before. And going up the Gunsmoke back in them days weren't like shooting fish in a barrel."

"Yeah, there was the Injuns!"

"Injuns; and drifting packs of outlaws. The Government had sent in a parcel of marshals to clean up the Territory. Them that got away—the killers were prices on their heads—they backed up along the Gunsmoke Trail. Weren't safe for 'em to venture outa that piece of country for more 'n two years. They lived like wolves up there, and they was coyotes for fair. Why, in them times, they'd cut a man down for a few coins or even the chance that he had some tobacco on him. And yet they was something up that trail that made these gents with Dal Fentriss take the risk."

"Must uh been more than a few ten thousands at the end of it," admitted Beebe, gouging at a spot on the table with his thumb-nail. They were interested now.

"Ten thousands? Talk in terms of hundreds and hundreds of thousands," snapped Ruby Priest. "That was what Fentriss himself told an old crony before he set out. He'd gotten the word on it from some Injun whose life he had saved. It was tribal-tribal lore about what was up there."

"How do we know it's still there?" said the practical-minded Chopper.

"BECAUSE they never come back; none of 'em. At least, not for years. And then they was only one—Fentriss, himself. One after the other, they got killed along the Gunsmoke. The outlaw packs got some. They had hired Ike Booth, the famous scout from the Llanos Estacados, to go in with 'em. Him and one of the party had a fallin' out; they burned each other down. The Injuns got some. For years, nobody come back. Folks gave 'em up." He broke off to unhurriedly put flame to another cigaret.

"Well?" said Stucky impatiently.

"'Bout ten-twelve years back, Fentriss turned up over in Watkins Gulch. At least, he claimed he was Dal Fentriss; nobody could tell. His hair had gone pure white and he was nothing but a walking skeleton anyways. And he was clean outa his head in the bargain. Folks paid him no heed and he worked as a swamper over there and—"

"I said they was too much locoed stuff tied inta this," said Chopper disgustedly.

Flicking him with his eyes, Priest went on imperturbably. "—and he died of old age. But as he lay dying, in the last few days, he had some sane moments. And another coot, fella named One-Foot Hope, was with him. And Hope, he put down what Fentriss said."

"Fentriss told where the cache was —and what it was?" asked Stucky.

Ruby Priest shook his head. "Not—exactly. But he told about the graves along the trail, the graves where the rest of the party was buried."

"Ain't that purty," sneered Con Chopper, riding a gun butt with the palm of his hand. "Now, ain't it? Graves! What do they mean to us?"

"To an ignorant scissor-bill like you—it'd mean nothing. But maybe the others'd like to hear, Con. . . You ain't nailed to that chair, either; nobody's keeping ya here." But Chopper didn't leave as Priest continued. "Well, like I was saying—the graves; they're danged important. Because, you see, they had a hunch they mightn't come out—come back down the Gunsmoke. And even if one of them got all the way through to their destination, he still might be captured. If he had the map of the place on him, somebody else would have the secret. And if he died—it might be lost forever."

"Ye-uh?" said Stuck, tensed over the table now. Beebe was tonguing his lower lip steadily, genuinely interested at last.

"So when the first man died, they left a piece of the map at his grave. The rest of them had memorized it anyway. And when the second one got his chips cashed, they buried another piece of the map with him. And so on with the third and fourth. Now you put these pieces all together and you got—"

Beebe bounced out of his chair with excitement. "The map of the place where the cache—or whatever it is—lies, huh?"

Speaking hoarsely as he stabbed a long arm over the table, Con Chopper husked, "Then whoever knows where the graves are—he can git the whole map?" And Ruby Priest sat nodding smugly.

CHAPTER IV

"NOW YOU fellas wanta call me locoed?" Priest sat back, chuckling upietly with satisfaction. "It's the luck of the Priests. Folks've been counting me whupped, and that walks smack inta my hands!" He gestured at the door beyond which Sommers, the monte dealer, waited for the decision. "He's got that map of the graves on the Gunsmoke Trail. And *offerin'* it to me, too!"

Chopper kept nodding. "And how did he git it?"

"It was this fella Hope who was with Fentriss when he kicked the bucket," Priest told it again. He knew he had them now, that they were sold on the incredible loot that awaited them at the end of the Gunsmoke. "Fentriss told him to try to find any descendants of the original bunch who went up the trail. Hope admitted to Sommers that he'd found out about one family related to one of the men. Sebolt, I think, is the

name. And he found the grandson of another, somebody named Winrod. Seems this Winrod, too, is a helpless cripple. So that cuts him from the deck. Now—"

"How did Sommers git it?" Chopper insisted. He was a hard-headed one, always smelling for the joker in a pack.

"This Hope is an old whisky-hound," Priest said. "Seems when he was scouting around for these descendants, he'd git himself a skinful of tanglefoot every so often. Sommers got talking to him one of those times, and he got the old fool to show him the map of the graves up along the Gunsmoke. The four graves."

"Four, huh?" said the precise minded Chopper.

"Yep. Sommers copied the map while he kept slapping drinks inta him. Now, Sommers is here."

The plumpish Stucky rubbed wetted first and second fingers against his thumb as if counting bills. "And he wants five thousand for it—plus a third of the cache at the other end, eh?"

"It's high—considering we don't know what we're gitting," Chopper appraised it.

"Leave it to me. I'll chisel him down plenty."

"More of us in on it, less each one gets," said Stucky.

"I've been thinking of that," Ruby Priest agreed. "What I want to know is—are you with me? Are you coming up the Gunsmoke."

"They's that Corrigan," reminded Chopper again.

"He's after me—not you."

"It's hard-bitten country even now up along the Gunsmoke," said Stucky, eyes dreamy with thoughtfulness. "Lobo country."

"That's one of my points. The Billy Scott Bunch hangs out up that way," Priest said. "And I know Billy personal. That's a hole card."

BEEBE WAS nodding now at everything the boss said. Skin Beebe was a plain out-and-out gunman. He never thought any other way, in any other terms. All he wanted to know was what were the odds of stopping lead and the layoff at the finish. He was ready to go.

Chopper scratched his beard-stubbled jaw. "Yeah. . . Yeah. . . by the way, Ruby, The Hombre—that Hombre Kirby—was seen over by Rocky Forks. Fella rode in and told of it."

Bluff florid Priest started a guffaw, but it never quite came off. "The Hombre, eh. . . . Well, what of it? The country's free. He—he wouldn't be in on this. It's only descendants of the original bunch."

Chopper shrugged. "I was just thinking of the time you got inta that shooting scrape about two years back with Satin Chapman. Satin and The Hombre was pards once. That's all."

Some of the high color had ebbed from Ruby Priest's countenance. "Yes-s, Satin Chapman. I remember; a fancy plush dude, if I ever peeled an eye on one. Him with his silver-inlaid ivory-stocked smokepoles and his slicked-down hair an' his big diamond ring an' silk shirt. Yes, I recollect him all right. And with all his big rep, he didn't get me, by—"

"Took me and three others to stop him," Chopper said with dry terseness.

Priest clattered the saucer as he punched out his cigaret angrily. "Aw, to the devil with him—and The Hombre too. I'll be along up the Gunsmoke before The Hombre gits here. That ex-badge packer has to travel under cover too, you know. . . . Well, are you with me?"

Stucky nodded too this time. "There must be piles an' piles of dinero up there," he said. "Heaps of it. One job like this. . . . "

And finally, slowly, Con Chopper moved his head in an up-and-down motion. "Pervided you git Sommers to cut down his share," he added conditionally.

"Leave him to me!" Ruby Priest had already risen to his full six-foot-two. "Nice wind, ain't it? Covers all kinds of noise." He went out the door into the hall, calling Sommers by name.

SOMMERS answered. Ruby Priest told him to stay where he was.

He went over to the table where a stub of candle guttered, a faint point of light in the big hall. Sommers had stood up. Priest went very close to him and they talked. "'S too much dinero, Sommers," those back in the room heard Ruby say half-pleadingly once. Then, "Well, if. . . " Priest's left hand moved out, unnoticed by the little monte dealer. And the candle was snuffed out.

Sommers gulped, "Hey, what the hell is—"

"Easy,mister. Easy," said Ruby Priest. "Just stand steady and. . . . "

"But that's a gun you got in my side, Ruby!" Sommers shrilled.

There was a muffled gun report and a second—the sound of a body collapsing into a chair. The quirly Sommers had been smoking bounced on the floor in a little shower of sparks. A boot moved over and squashed it out. It wasn't Sommers' boot. Then all was still save for the sough of the wind about the place, the faint scampering of a pack rat.

Some moments later, Ruby Priest re-entered the interior room, thumbing fresh shells into one of his guns. He tossed a folded paper onto the table. "There's the layout of the four graves along the Gunsmoke. Boys, this is going to be as easy as spittin' in the river. . . . Oh, Mr. Sommers won't be able to come along with us. He had a fatal heart attack."

"Let's hit the trail tonight," Chopper said, dour as ever. "I'll bet we still have trouble, though."

"You see," said Priest, pointing with a white finger at the map, "the first grave—Benson's, it says—is right there outside of Capitan. . . . "

WHAT HAD once been a makeshift cross, rotted and crumbling, leaned a-tilt at the head of the ragged mound. The old mound was right in the lee of the long, red-streaked boulder at the bend in the canyon as described on the map turned over by One-Foot Hope. The grizzled Montana had not expected it to be so accurate, had figured on trouble in locating the grave. But there it was in the canyon south of Capitan as claimed.

He raised his faded eyes to the girl Barbara. "This mightn't—well, it might not be so purty," he suggested. "Mebbe you—"

She gestured with the .32 she held. "Dig, Montan."

On his knees, the old-timer started to scrape at the head of the grave, using a pointed stick. The weather-eaten cross toppled. Montana struck something hard, wrapped in tarpaulin. A man's skull, probably. He worked away from it, sweating despite the chill wind of the bleak overcast day. The stick thudded against wood.

A moment later, he was lifting out a cartridge box. It was dirt-encrusted and moldy, so rotten it was ready to fall apart. Above him Barbara's quick-caught breath sounded. Carefully he put it down and saw that the box top had been nailed on. He used his Bowie blade. The wood crumbled under the pressure; rusted nails slipped free. The top came off to reveal a wad encased in tarpaulin inside. The covering fell apart in decayed damp shreds.

"Don't count on too much," Montana warned, looking up at her once more. A pair of bat-wing chaps had replaced her riding skirt. And beneath her sombrero, a red neckerchief bound up her dark hair from sight. It was Montana's idea. For safety's sake, he hoped to have her taken as a man along the Gunsmoke. "Long time's gone. And mebbe—well, mebbe old Fentriss was outa his head and only dreamed—"

"Open it, Montan," she said drily.

Obeying, he pulled the crumbling pieces of tarpaulin away. A rusted tin can was revealed. Prying the lid up, he got at the small oilskin wrapped package inside. Unfolding the oilskin, he came to a piece of thin folded white leather. It opened stiffly as he worked at flattening it out.

Montana's faded eyes bulged. Holding her breath, Barbara bent close. And there, before their eyes, was a section of the map showing where the treasure, that Fentriss and his party had been after, lay. It was burnt into the leather with a hot nail, a

series of meaningless black lines. All of them ran off to a ragged torn side of the leather where the rest of it had obviously been detached.

"It's it," Barbara said softly, hushed-voiced.

"Won't make no sense till we git the other pieces," Montana muttered. "It—" Then he slapped a hand to his holster, head swivelling.

BACK UP the canyon, The Hombre pulled his head down into the foliage. It didn't seem possible that the man kneeling at the head of the first grave on the Gunsmoke Trail could have spotted him. Shifting position slightly, he risked a glance around some white-flowered Spanish bayonet stalks. The pair up there were swinging into the saddle. He watched them ride off toward the mouth of the canyon and Capitan beyond.

But he had to wait. The stocky, thick-set one with the white hair kept shooting glances rearward. Then they dropped down from the end of the canyon onto the plain stretching from Capitan. Hombre Kirby raked back his yellow hair, slapped on his flat-crowned sombrero and led his pony from the clump of alders.

When he got to the grave of Jeremiah Benson, he saw they had that section of the map. As the first purple shadows speared out from the west wall of the canyon, he stared at where they'd gone, hitching at his gunbelt. It was a good bet they'd stop over in Capitan, two against one. But he was determined to jump them and get that segment of the map of the Gunsmoke treasure. He rode down toward the end of the canyon.

Back in the brush at the bend, Con Chopper's cadaverous face darkened. He didn't waste any time investigating the grave. He could see the freshly turned earth. To Chopper, it was obvious that the stoop-shouldered hombre with the stamp of ruthlessness on his flat-sided face had found what he wanted. Otherwise he wouldn't be riding off.

And Chopper had recognized him as The Hombre. Chopper wheeled his pony to go back to tell Ruby Priest with the main party. This complicated things, and in a tough way. The Hombre. . . .

CHAPTER V

STEPPING FROM the half-leaf doors of one barroom, Hombre Kirby eased along Capitan's main street. That was the fifth place he had dropped into, and there was no sign of the squat white-haired one or his slim companion. Threading his way through a clump of people before the General Store, Kirby rounded the corner into a side street. The next instant, he froze, then sidled into the deeper shadows beside the building.

Light from a coal-oil torch beside a doorway flickered off the badge on the vest of an approaching hombre. He was the town marshal of Capitan, a huge bull-chested gent walking with an obvious swagger. Head bowed, The Hombre became intent on the fashioning of a tube of Durham. But he was tense and his hands were ready to dive for his .45's.

The big marshal passed him without any notice, swinging out to a paint pony at a nearby hitchrack. Somebody called out to him as he mounted. "Just got a tip that Roberts, the horsethief, is laying up in the Pass with a busted leg, aim to slope over for a looksee." He moved off around the corner.

Hombre Kirby relaxed. Recognition might have been dangerous. some of the badge-packing gentry considered him worse than the toughest owlhoot-riding lobo. They rated him as a traitor and renegade because he had been a deputy sheriff before he had turned in his badge and quit. More than one John Law claimed Kirby had gone bad and become an outlaw himself.

What they didn't know was what had driven him to make the move; he had once helped to convice a man and superintended his hanging only to discover later that the poor devil had been innocent. It had been almost enough to break the spirit of an instinctive square-shooter like Hombre

Kirby, had made him decide to dedicate his life to making amends.

So Kirby had stepped out as a John Law and hit the out-trails. Working without benefit of a star or authority, he had sought to correct injustices not reached by the Law, to help the weak as well as extended a helping hand to those, who in desperation, might have made a misstep. He would always hold himself responsible for the innocent hombre who had been strung up.

But many a John Law suspected him. They claimed he could do a better job working behind the authority of a badge. And since he had burned down that crooked deputy over at Jacquima, the one who had been holding up small ranchers for protection dinero, more than a few badge-packers had promised to smoke Hombre Kirby down on sight.

BUT HE was as calm and casual-looking as ever when he stepped into the whisky mill down the sidestreet. Just as he ordered a shot of redeye, Kirby thought he had caught up with the white-hiared hairpin and his companion. The man was seated at a table over in a corner with two-three others, but as The Hombre shifted over to get a look at his face, the man rose to leave. And he walked with the pronounced limp of a clubfoot. Leaving after a few minutes, Kirby returned to the livery stable where he'd left his cayuse to be grained and groomed. He was beginning to wonder if the pair he had seen at the grave could have passed on through Capitan.

As he came out of the livery stable alley, he noticed the small restaurant tucked in between a big hay and feed store and a boarded-up building. It reminded him that he'd had no grub since the breakfast he had cooked that morning out on the trail. Leaving the black mare at the hitch rack, he entered the dingy little place. A smiling old Chinese shuffled forward in slippers to greet him in the wan light of the two oil lanterns strung from the ceiling. At the table, Kirby ordered some hawg hip and cackle berries. The proprietor shuffled back into his smoky kitchen. Then voices came from around an ell of the dim place.

"The second grave, now, the way I figure, is 'bout thirty miles up the line," one speaker said.

Kirby had already galvanized. He was up and moving noiselessly toward the rear where the ell branched off. The speaker went on:

"That'll be the grave of your grandfather, Myles Sebolt."

Hat yanked down low over his eyes, Hombre Kirby slouched around the corner. Two people were seated at a table there. It was the white-haired gent who had his back to Kirby. They were the pair he had seen at the grave, all right. The next instant he had one of his hoglegs out, held close to his leg. The slim younger one, Barbara Sebolt, whom he took for a man at the moment, saw him first and half rose. She made a move toward her .32.

"Boothills are full of gents who made their move too late," Kirby said quietly. But his gun hammer was cocked and his blue eyes bleak as he swivelled them to Montana Hannan who twisted in startlement. "Hate to interrupt your chow, gents. But—"

"Who're you?" demanded Montana.

The Hombre shruged. "Just the gent who saw you two remove something from the grave up that canyon to the south. . . . Let's step outside where we can conduct our business without disturbing anybody." He gestured toward the screen door at the side of the place.

Montana's face hardened. Had the girl not been present, he might have tried a play. Instead, he gave her a signal. They rose and moved out the side door ahead of The Hombre. They were in a narrow dark alley. Kirby ordered them to proceed toward the rear.

"All right, now. Let me have that piece of the Gunsmoke map. I'm in a hurry."

"Map?" stalled Montana. "What piece of map? I ain't got no idea what you're talking about, stranger. I—"

THE GIRL tried again to make a play for her gun. Hombre Kirby,

out there in the dimness, had less chance than ever of detecting that she was not a man. His left fist snaked out with incredible quickness, and Barbara Sebolt stumbled backward from the blow alongside the jaw. Before Montana could move, The Hombre, had his Colts swivelled onto him.

"Easy," he warned. "I don't aim to kill anybody, but I ain't being stopped. . . Now, the map, please."

Montana couldn't stand seeing the girl hurt. Digging inside his shirt, he produced the aged piece of folded leather from a money belt strapped against his skin. Kirby took it. The next instant he had jerked out Montana's hoglegs, dropped them on the ground. He took the girl's .32 also, smiling wryly at it.

"Button like you totes a peashooter, eh?" he commented. "Now start walking out to the back there. When I whistle, you can stop. Try to turn back afore then—and it'll be the whistle of a bullet you'll hear!"

They moved off across the night, passing through a beam of light from the kitchen of the restaurant. For a few moments, The Hombre watched them, then he whirled and dashed up the alley. In a matter of moments he was in the saddle of the coal-black mare and moving out of Capitan for the trail that ran northward toward the next grave.

Back behind the restaurant, Montana slowed, then halted altogether. Nothing happened. "He's gone, Miss Barbara. . . It's all right now."

A dry sob came from her clenched teeth despite herself. Old Montana patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Don't worry, Ma'm. I figured there might be trouble. When I was washing up, I made a copy of the map." He bent to extract it from one of his boots. . . .

INSIDE of half a mile after quitting Capitan, Hombre Kirby sensed that he was being followed. Dismounting for a moment, he had put his ear against the ground. The steady wind was coming down from the north, blowing from him back toward Capitan, but from the ground he got the vibrations of several riders coming along the back-trail at a gallop.

Wondering if they had organized a posse to take after him, he speculated on cutting off from the trail. But because of the sheer-walled ravine with the deep fast-running creek at its bottom on the right of the trail, he would be forced to swing south. That would mean delay in reaching the second grave up the line, and speed up the Gunsmoke Trail was the all-important thing. He kept going. Once he reached the crossroads ahead where the trail branched off directly northward, he could quit the road if necessary.

By the time Kirby had gone a couple of miles further, a wheat-colored slice of moon was ascending the blue-black sky behind him. Glancing back he had a glimpse of the pair of riders as they came over a rise. It gave him a shock to realize they were much less than half a mile behind, they must have taken some short-cut after leaving the town.

Still, he wasn't worried. Two men constituted no posse, nor too much to handle if there had to be a showdown. He pressed on for the crossroads at a stiff gallop.

Just before reaching them, as the trail dropped, the roaring creek on the right angled southward and passed under a short bridge. Kirby's mare crossed it with a booming of hoofs. Ahead, at the intersection of trails a boarded-up store, long closed, crouched in the night. There he would swing northward. Then some instinct-born hunch, made him rein down abruptly. It was just in time to save himself from probable serious injury.

The mare hit the manilla rope stretched across the road a few inches from the alkali surface. Plunging out of control, the animal went crashing groundward. The Hombre was sent hurtling over the mare's head. Before he hit the ground he saw a figure rising from the undergrowth off to the left. Then he was bounding through the dust, half-stunned, clutching at his holster

tops to keep from losing his smokepoles.

A bullet winged off his head as he floundered up to his knees. Somebody bawled at him to surrender. Another slug whined by, but the gun reports came to him only dimly. His skull throbbed with a thousand triphammers inside it from the blow he had taken on one side of his forehead. And the whole scene kept swinging and swaying before his eyes.

CLAMBERING to his feet, Kirby succeeded in drawing one gun, his legs seemed to have become rubber as he spat out some of the dirt he had scrapped into his teeth. He fired once at a man in the brush over to the right. Then, in the moonlight, it seemed as if there were two of them, both moon-faced and exactly alike. He realized it was vertigo, he was verging on complete unconsciousness as he somehow managed to stumble into the shadow of a scrawny cottonwood. He worked deeper into the brush.

The two riders who'd been trailing him came pounding down the slope. There was a lot of yelling. He moved a few yards and a snarling bullet clipped away foliage where he had been. He still was unable to see straight and he rocked like a drunken jasper with every movement. It would merely be a matter of time before they hunted him down and ringed him in in that patch of brush.

He got to the back end of the patch, slamming lead once at a sombrero that bobbed up ten yards away, then broke across open ground for the shadows of the closed-up store building. Lead hailed after him. He didn't have to try to zigzag; his staggering gait took care of that for him. Somebody yelled his name after him.

He got onto the porch of the place only to find the door boarded up solidly, and the windows as well. Dropping off the far side of the porch, he went around to the rear, but that was locked up tightly too. Using a gun butt, he smashed the padlock on a back door, but the effort was in vain, the door was barred from the inside. Wheeling, he saw a small log-pole cabin standing up on the slope, a couple of hundred feet behind the store.

A gun muzzle blazed livid flame from behind a tree in the direction of the trail. The Hombre sent an answering slug, then struck out for the cabin. Hoofbeats drummed behind him, but he was up among the few scattered cottonwoods before they realized where he was headed. The door of the cabin was closed but gave to the desperate thrust of his shoulder.

Panting for breath, he jumped inside. His senses were beginning to steady and the fierce pounding in his head was abating. Hurriedly he scratched a match in the heavy gloom and saw he had walked into a trap. On three sides, the place was windowless. On the fourth there was just the door. It had been some kind of a store-house instead of a living place. He poked between the logs in the back wall, but they were snugly fitted and chinked with adobe. On three sides he would be unable to defend himself against anybody working in.

Flinging back to the door, he opened it a few inches and started to slide out. From down amid the trees, a Colts blinked twice on the night. A slug caromed off the front of the place. Another gun opened fire from behind a boulder on his left. They already had him on both flanks. It would be practically suicide to try to get away from the cabin now. He leaped back into the doorway, aware that if nothing else they could eventually starve him out. . . .

CHAPTER VI

RUBY PRIEST didn't waste any time getting at the Hombre. He too was in a hurry to get along up the Gunsmoke just in case there might be other parties working. He sent his men at the storehouse cabin from the two sides

of the blind end walls. They worked in through the grass and brush. Priest and the cadaverous Con Chopper kept the front covered.

"He's got to either come out in the open to get a shot at the others or be trapped inside and blasted down," Priest stated confidently. "And either way he loses! So—"

"Remember, he's The Hombre," warned Chopper, crouched behind a boulder. "He—"

Stucky, on hands and knees, was just a few yards from the front corner of the place. At the other side, another hairpin dashed across a bare moonlit space and got behind a stump. The next instant Kirby had flung out the dark doorway. Stucky got in the first shot but missed the sidling Hombre. One of the latter's hoglegs crackled out. There was a cry from moon-faced Stucky, and he was back down in the grass and crawling away in retreat.

Ruby Priest and Chopper rode their triggers hard, but the wheeling never-still man up there seemed to bear a charmed life. Then the jasper behind the stump reared up for a shot. The spidery legged Kirby seemed to be awaiting just that. Both his weapons snarled into coughing action.

One moment the man behind the stump had a face, the next, he didn't. The man tottered and went over backward, lay motionless. Then The Hombre had darted back inside the door with lead plucking at his heels.

Ruby Priest cursed heartily as he got worried. He moved around through the grass to the retreating Stucky. "Hurt bad?" he asked the moon-faced gunman. Cursing monotonously and holding a neckerchief to his head, Stucky said he had a flesh gash over one ear, but Priest realized he had barely escaped death. And that Howard up behind the stump, an extra gunslinger he had picked up after leaving Masalla, was dead. He didn't want any more losses like that, before he'd located the rest of the graves, he'd need every gun he had to back his play.

"I got it," he cried as Chopper's gun crackled once at some movement around the door. "He can't cover anybody coming in from the back or sides without coming out inta the open. We'll burn him out. It'll be easy." Hustling back to their ponies, he returned with a Winchester and handed it over to Con Chopper. "Keep peppering that doorway and keep him inside. We got him like a rat. You'll see!" he rubbed his ruby as he moved off.

UP IN THE log-pole hut The Hombre had already shoved fresh shells into his Colts. He had a slight bullet nick in his left forearm, but the blood flow barely stained his shirt much less interfered with his shooting. He hoped they'd make another rush. Another man killed or seriously wounded and the sand would run out of their craws. Then he saw that little fire flame up on the night back by the cottonwoods. Two figures moved around it, but they were out of gunshot.

There was the reverberating crack of the Winchester again as another bullet droned through the open doorway and into one of the back logs. The Hombre had already ducked back. Crouched low he took another looksee out the door. The fire was going strongly now. He couldn't savvy what their idea was unless they were getting comfortable to starve him out.

The waxing moon was higher and stronger. It cast a bluish illumination almost as strong as hazy daylight before the log-pole place. The Hombre knew the next time he moved out to meet a charge it would be a danged sight more perilous. Another rifle slug thudded into the place, then he saw one of the figures leave the fire bearing a couple of blazing torches. The man moved off to the right between the hut and the store, passing from sight.

And Kirby knew what was coming.

A few minutes later, from behind the hut, came the glow of one of the approaching torches, from the other side, off beyond the back corner, came the same kind of a glow. The solidly built place was dry as tinder;

a torch slung onto that plank roof would make a raging blaze in a matter of moments. They had him, because neither of the torch bearers would have to come around to the front to do their work. To get at them, he would have to emerge and cross the open space in front. And though reckless, Kirby was no idiot, those two down there in front couldn't fail to get him, especially with the torch glow illuminating him.

There was a call from out in front. "Hombre! Hombre Kirby!" bawled Ruby Priest. "You can surrender of we'll burn you out, by Gawd!"

"Go spit in your hat," yelled The Hombre. The only chance seemed an all-or-nothing rush once the place was afire. Perhaps he could use a screen of drifting smoke to bust his way through the ring.

Priest was doing some fast thinking too. A gambler to the core, he was always a percentage player, and this Hombre was one all-fired devil with his hoglegs. Forced out by the fire, The Hombre might get a couple of his men before he himself had his chips cashed, and that would leave only one man to go on up the Gunsmoke with him. Priest was in favor of a Mexican standoff.

"Listen, Hombre! We can talk business," Priest told him. "We don't want to kill you if we don't have to. We—"

"Sure, I know," came back Hombre Kirby caustically. "You fellas really *love* me! Sure!"

"Look, Hombre! All we want is what you took from Benson's grave back in the canyon."

"Didn't take nothing," The Hombre came back honestly.

"Fifty gits you a hundred we'll find it on your dead body, Hombre." Ruby Priest moved up closer. "But you can leave here under your own power, if you want to."

FROM DEEP inside the doorway the besieged man's eyes flickered to the torch glow stretching beyond either corner of the cabin. There were five graves up the Gunsmoke. This was only one hand of the game, not the jackpot. "All right. What's the proposition?"

"You toss out that piece of map. 'S all we want. Then we'll ride off and leave you alone."

There was a crackling in the brush behind the pole-log place. The torch glow out on the right seemed to have faded. But when The Hombre smelled smoke, the undergrowth was afire. Soon it would reach the hut and. . . .

They had outslicked him. He and Priest dickered for half a minute. It was agreed Kirby's mare would be brought around to the hut.

Chopper went down to the trail and returned with the animal, leaving her ground-anchored in plain sight out in the moonlight not many yards away. The angular Chopper and Ruby Priest moved slowly toward the log-pole building. They paused, lifting out their hoglegs. Appearing in the doorway, Kirby nodded. Simultaneously he tossed his two out onto the dirt as they dropped theirs.

"Always heard you was an honorable jasper," Priest said. The ruby in his shirt front glowed plainly in the moonlight. Spotting it, The Hombre knew who he was. He had picked up aplenty in his travels concerning the king gambler of Rocky Forks.

The two came on, Chopper stepping as if he walked on eggs, dour face a-sneer. Then the trapped man pulled out the folded leather segment of map and tossed it out a few feet from the doorway. Flame leaped from a clump of dried grass and licked around one of the exposed beam ends at a front corner of the place. Ruby Priest had halted. Chopper came on. Bending, he snatched up the folded map, turned, and tossed it to the boss. Then he took a hurried stride to run back.

But The Hombre was too quick for him. Leaping from the doorway, he landed on the lean ace gunman from behind. Kirby's forearm snapped around Chopper's neck and clamped stranglingly against his windpipe.

The next instant he had hooked the hideout gun from beneath Chopper's shirt. Kirby had spotted the bulge of it as Chopper came up.

The move was in the nick of time. Ruby Priest had had an extra ace up his sleeve to be played once he had possession of the piece of map. It was Skin Beebe who jumped from the brush off to the left of the hut, cocked gun swinging up to draw bead. The plan was to burn down The Hombre before he could recover his own weapons, but now he had Chopper as a human shield and his .45 as well.

The Hombre laughed at them. "Oh, no you don't, boys!" he said as he backed, dragging the kicking off-balance Chopper with him. "Go ahead—trigger! And count your dead!" He got back into the darkness of the hut.

Beebe had dived back into the brush, and Ruby Priest had already thrown himself flat and was bellying off.

Kirby called out from the interior. "Now, drag your tails, polecats! There ain't going to be any little ambush up the trail somewheres either! I'll release this lop-eared chunkhead later—if you coyotes behave. Make tracks!"

RUBY PRIEST did some fine and fancy cursing out in the grass, even bellowed some threats when The Hombre with his prisoner was forced out of the burning hut. But a few minutes later, Priest, Beebe, and Stucky swung into the saddle down at the intersection and rode off eastward.

Priest was roaring mad, but there was nothing he could do. Con Chopper was not only his bodyguard, a tophand trigger man, but also the only gent Priest really trusted. He didn't want to lose him with the rest of the trip up the Gunsmoke ahead. And he could depend on Chopper being released once Hombre Kirby had promised it. It wasn't simply because Kirby was tough as an oven-baked boot and aided them that the small people had dubbed Kirby "The Hombre," The Man. It was also because they could trust him implicitly, because it was known he would walk barefooted over Hell's own coals to keep his word once given. Priest knew that.

After about half an hour, the wary Hombre prodded Chopper down through the cottonwoods to Chopper's cayuse. From his own saddle roll, Kirby took some pigging strings and trussed up the gunman's arms. Then he shoved him up into the hull.

"Where're you taking me?" demanded Chopper.

The Hombre gave him a crooked smile in the moonlight. "Shucks, fella, do you need ask? Once I'm clear of your pards, we'll find a quiet little hole up in the hills. . . ."

"Yes?"

"A place so quiet nobody'll find your grave for years. You're too dangerous to leave running around. You're a gun-slick, anybody can see." The Hombre gestured toward the cross-trail bending off to the north. "Give your horse the gut-hooks, mister."

The dirty stones that were Chopper's eyes seemed to pale with fear. With gun butts warming his hands, he was a killer, without them he was just another mangy coyote. Despair made him slump in the hull as they sloped northward at a stiff gait. Kirby rode with a gun constantly in his hand and watching the back-trail carefully. He knew that Ruby Priest would be hovering around to pick up his gunman as soon as possible.

It was some hours later, with the night waning, that Kirby decided it was safe to release Chopper. They had come up a long bare slope. Looking back down it, the Hombre had been able to see that nobody was hanging close. Half a mile on, a rocky gulch branched off from the trail. Kirby ordered Chopper to lead the way up it. Around a bend he called a halt. Slashing Chopper's bonds, he had him dismount.

"For Gawd's sake, don't burn me without a chance," Chopper immedi-

ately began to beg in that voice incapable of tone. "I—"

The Hombre pulled out the hideout weapon he'd taken from Ruby Priest's gunman. "A chance, eh? Wel, we *could* shoot it out."

CHOPPER'S lips curled back from his teeth. "Looka here, Hombre. I just work for Priest. I—I gotta do what he says. He's got something on me."

"Keep a-spinning your tale," Kirby said patronizingly.

Chopper shivered in the chill predawn breeze. "Well, I reckon we—I mean, you and Priest—you're both up this way for the same thing."

"Uh-huh. Maybe."

"Me, I just git paid a salary and gun stakes. Now, looka. Next time you two meet, I ain't buying chips, Hombre! I swear it on the grave of my mother. I won't draw against you, Hombre! I—I wanta live too."

"All right. You swear it."

"On my mother's grave, I do!"

The Hombre nodded. "Then take off your boots. Pronto!" Chopper looked puzzled but sat down and complied in the light of the smudged paling stars. "Hand them up," said Kirby from the saddle. It was what he had planned to do all the time. He took the boots.

The next moment, Con Chopper's hogleg had jumped level in The Hombre's hand. And it was spitting. Lead spurred the shale and rock about the gunman's socks. "Git going up the gulch!" The Hombre barked.

No second command was necessary. Lank body doubled, Con Chopper took to his heels like a coyote with a fire under his tail. A piece of shale, smashed by a slug, gashed his left heel. He thought he had been shot and picked up speed, rocking on his long legs. He shrieked with fear and pain as the sharp stones sliced open his socks and then the soles of his feet. When he ducked around an elbow of the rock at the next bend, he was hobbling painfully.

Turning with a chuckle, The Hombre rode back out of the gulch to the trail. He tossed Chopper's Colts into a thicket and his boots after them. From inside his shirt he brought forth the chart of the five all-important graves up the Gunsmoke with instructions about locating them. The second grave was that of Myles Sebolt. It lay up on Bitteroot Creek, not far off now. Kirby touched the powerful black mare with his dull-rowelled spurs.

He had his moves all planned out. The trick now was to reach Sebolt's grave before the Priest party or that white-haired jasper and his little pard. Then, when he possessed himself of the piece of map there, he could bargain with Priest. . . offer to swap Priest the second piece in return for a copy of the first. That would be after he made certain alterations in the second piece, rendering it useless, of course.

The stratagem seemed as easy as spitting in a creek.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS A COUPLE of hours after sun-up when Kirby pulled up at the fork in the trail. The right branch was little more than a path between wooded hills. It was down that branch the creek lay. Before he had followed the winding cart ruts more than a mile, he came upon the fence-line paralleling the track on his right. The long hill flattened and he had a glimpse of some grazing land. Another bend and the oxbow of Bitteroot Creek, as described in the paper with the layout of the graves, was in the hollow just below.

But the creek was inside barbed wire, and according to the instructions, Sebolt had been buried a couple of hundred yards around the bow of the creek under a stand of red willows. At the time he had been laid away to rest, of course, this cow outfit had not been here, and there had been no fence. Kirby dropped down into the hollow. Inside the wire he could see wagon ruts and hoofprints on the gray mud flats of the creek. Then the wind stirred

some foliage and he was looking at a locked gate in the fence—and at a fresh-painted sign nailed to one of the gate posts. It read:

Stay off! My riders have orders to shoot on sight. Too many rustlers. . . .

J. M. Embree
Owner, Leaning-E

And at the bottom, daubed crudely in garish red, was a skull and crossbones. That last made Kirby chuckle, it was so melodramatic. Otherwise he might have weighed the thing.

"Pardon me for not scaring easy, Mr. Embree," he said mockingly as he dropped to the ground. In a matter of minutes he had shattered the padlock on the gate and ridden through to the creek. He followed it down stream as per the directions. But after he had rounded the bow and ridden for about ten minutes, he realized something was wrong. He hadn't seen any red willows.

Turning he moved back through the shallows, eyes raking either bank. Then he was cursing himself for a lunkheaded pelican. Of course the odds were the willows would be dead and gone by now. Those rotting stumps over there on the left bank would be what was left of them. As he rode closer, some yards back from them he distinguished the unmarked grass-grown mound that must be Myles Sebolt's grave. Leaping from the saddle, he hustled toward it.

HIS IMPETUOSITY cost him. It seemed as if somebody opened Hell's back door. Half a dozen guns rattled out and a veritable smother of lead clipped all around him. It was little less than a miracle that he wasn't cut down. As he dived into the high grass, he glimpsed two riders appearing around the bend as they triggered. And some of the slugs had come from the opposite bank; he was about hemmed in.

Rolling hard, he drew as he bellied ahead from the spot where he had landed. He slapped his sombrero back on his shoulders so that it hung by the chin strings. Working to some aspens down the bank, he sighted a horseman moving from a cut in the bank. The man was trying to locate him in the grass. Kirby started to come up, figuring if he could jump that gent he could get his cayuse and get away.

"Why in blazes don't I kill ya in your tracks?" said a voice from the foliage of the aspens behind The Hombre.

Hombre Kirby knew when a man had his shoulder blades dead in his gunsights. As those across the creek yelled at sight of him, he straightened and lifting his gun-bearing hands. Boots squashed down the grass behind him.

"Git shed of the gun irons, pilgrim." Kirby obeyed, half turning to see the other gent. He was a bull-chested hombre with a spade of matted black beard as the base for a brick-red face. The next moment, the gent's fist slashed out and gave The Hombre a mule kick on the jaw. He sank, unconscious.

When he came out of the black fog, he realized somebody had sloshed a hatful of water over his head. He blinked away the moisture to see six hairpins standing around. As he half sat up he saw that his shirt hung open. It meant they had searched him. But he worked his hand over and could feel the layout of the Gunsmoke graves in the trick pocket sewn on the inner side of his shirt.

"He looks like one of them C. P. A. sneaks all right," one of the half dozen said, sneering down. "A danged range detective, by grab!"

"Come on, you C. P. A. dog, git on your hind legs!" It was the spade-bearded one who'd struck The Hombre. He had a voice that always seemed to have a chuckle behind it. There was the same impression about his face. A scar running up from one corner of his mouth pulled the lips so that he seemed constantly on the verge of laughing. But his eyes were mean and sly. "Git up, you Association tramp, I said!" He flailed out casually with a boot.

THE Hombre rose, a little muscle in his right cheek twitching with cold fury. "I'm no Cattlemen's Protective agent," he said, calmly, knowing he was in a real tight. "And just what the hell is the game here?"

Spade Beard's open hand shot out and landed across The Hombre's mouth. "Mind your tongue when you're addressing your betters. . . Me, I'm Boyd, foreman of the Leaning-E. Now, speak your piece!"

The Hombre paled about the mouth. From the tail of his eye he saw a man flipping the loop of his manila rope. "I'm no C. P. A. man. I—"

"What the hell are you doing on Leaning-E range then?" a gangling flat-faced one put in. "Why you'd break open the gate?"

Shrugging, The Hombre let his eyes run around them cooly. Somehow, though most of them were taller than he, he gave the impression of looking down on them. They were a hard-case handful, plainly a spread of gun-hands. "Anybody see me bust open the gate?" he asked, drawing out a sack of Durham.

"That ain't answering why you're on Leaning-E land!" Boyd prodded.

"The man I'm trailing came this way," extemporized The Hombre. When Boyd asked him who that was, Kirby shrugged. "Don't know his handle. He killed my saddle pard back in Masalla and I cut out after him. 'S all."

"But you was heading back upstream," another put in.

"Sure. Looking for sign to see if he'd turned up one of the banks. Nothing, though."

Kirby's nonchalant, don't-give-a-hoot manner, might have sold them the bill of goods. Boyd muttered to the others that maybe this jasper wasn't some sneak Betzer sent in after all, but just then another Leaning-E rider rounded the bend below and sang out.

"Hey, Eddie!" Boyd asked him. "You seen a rider going down the creek? Huh?"

Eddie shook his head. "Been following it up the last seven-eight miles from the haylands. Ain't seen hide ner hair of no human critter. Why? Is something—"

The Hombre was almost jerked from his feet as Boyd and another grabbed him. "Looking for a man, hunh!" spat Boyd. Everybody was yammering. "He's a C. P. A. sneak! Ya know the boss' orders!"

THERE were no trees around big enough for the purpose. Boyd said upstream. "And keep the sneak covered!" "I'll take care of that, by grab!" A rider dropped his loop over the prisoner's shoulders, locking his arms. They went splashing out into the creek on their ponies, dragging the stumbling Kirby through the water after them.

Up around the bow there were some big cottonwoods back on the inside bank. Kirby's wrists were lashed behind him with a pigging string. They were as noisy and excited as a half-drunk lynch mob. The Hombre alone was calm. He realized they were acting like danged scared gents, but that didn't help him any.

Hoisted into the saddle of his mare, he was shifted over under the hempen noose dangling from a cottonwood bough. "Got any last words for posterity, pilgrim?" Boyd asked mockingly.

"Sure. Next time you see your mother, ask her how she ever taught a coyote like you to stand on its hind legs like a man! And don't sell my mare cheap."

The raging Boyd was flinging his horse toward the captive and simultaneously roaring to the others to hold the rope and quirt Kirby's horse out from under him. But the last move was delayed as the berserk foreman got his animal in front of The Hombre's mare. The two men on the other end of the rope tightened it up and his chin was jerked as the loop closed snug and hard on his neck.

"Haul him up! Haul him up!" stormed Boyd.

"Hold everything!" The words came from back by the bank of the creek.

Heads swivelled. It was the white-haired Montana Hannan standing

there beside his pony, just out of the water. A little behind, in the saddle, was Barbara Sebolt, still rigged out as a man. Both of them had their guns out, old Montana with a pair spiking from his gnarled hands.

One of the Leaning-E hands tried for his holster. It was the keen-eyed girl who spotted the move. The .32, very steady in her gloved hand, bit out on the sudden silence. And through the blast of the report came the scream of the Leaning-E gunhand as lead ripped open his right arm. Nobody else tried to draw.

Montana advanced on his bowed legs, barking orders. The first was to cut loose Kirby. When it was done, the latter swung the mare over beside Boyd. Kirby yanked his Colts from Boyd's waistband, then relieved the foreman of his own hoglegs. He started to tell Boyd something.

"We gotta work fast, Kirby," snapped Montana. He had picked up The Hombre's name from a man who'd recognized the latter as he left Capitan.

THE Hombre smiled and flung Boyd's hoglegs out into the creek. With The Hombre and Montana covering them, the others shucked their hardware onto the ground.

"We don't want 'em on our coat tails," Montana said. Then he and The Hombre spoke in unison, as if they'd read each other's mind. "Climb down and git out inta the creek!"

A few moments later, sullen and cursing, the Leaning-E hands were wading downstream in knee-deep water. They went around the bend.

"You gents sure appeared at a handy moment. Now there is a gate I busted open just up the fence line and—" The Hombre started. And Barbara Sebolt's gun muzzle dented his back. Montana, bulldoggish face grim, stepped around and grabbed the barrels of The Hombre's lowered guns. The latter had no choice but to surrender them.

"Just so we'll talk business on our terms this time," Montana said gruffly. "Hit the leather, Kirby!"

They herded the ponies of the Leaning-E bunch out the gate before them and sent them stampeding in all directions when they reached the main trail. As they turned northward up it, Montana rode a little behind and kept The Hombre covered.

The latter put a match to the quirly he had built and chuckled. "You won't find things so humorous soon," said Montana's companion angrily.

The Hombre winked at her, still taking her for a younker and not a female. "Go spit in your hat, button! I know you didn't rescue me outa any humanitarian instincts. But you're due for one helluva surprise!"

"We talk later," said Montana as he moved his pony at a faster lope. "Now, we want ground behind us."

It was almost high noon when they dropped down from the rise toward the settlement on the sun-baked flat beside the sluggish yellow-watered stream. They drew up in the yard of a weather-stained dobie hovel a little up from the straggling handful of buildings that was hardly a bump on the trail. A figure dozing in the shade of a side wall pushed up a tattered straw sombrero to reveal a plump genial Mexican face.

"*Ohe, amigo!* The *padron,* Meester Montana," he cried out as he clambered up. "Ees good to see—" He broke off as he noted the grim stamp of Montana Hannan's face and his bared ready gun.

They dismounted and went into a little front room with a beaten earth floor. There was a rude homemade table and some patched chairs. With a gesture that was a command, Montana waved The Hombre into a chair. The Mex brought a bottle and some glasses and asked if they wanted grub.

"Not now. Maybe later. Maybe only for *two* 'stead of three," said Montana significantly. "Watch that trail up from the south, Jesu. You see a party of riders coming, let me know."

When the Mex had shuffled out, Montana bestrode a chair, resting his hand with the gun over the back of it. "All right, Kirby. We want—"

"So, so sorry," purred The Hombre. "Yes, I know. You want the first

piece of the map—the one from Benson's grave. Well, I haven't got—"

"We don't need that," said Montana. "We want the piece of map you took from Sebolt's grave, the second one back there on the Leaning-E range."

The Hombre frowned, puzzled. "I never took it. Never got a chance to, as a matter of fact. It's—"

Montana had jumped halfway up from the chair, shaking his head. "Don't lie, Hombre! You *must* have it. It's gone from the grave!"

CHAPTER VIII

A COUPLE of big blowflies buzzed in a somnolent courtship in the open doorway. Out in the road, a dry oven-hot puff of wind sent little eddies of dust twisting along the road. From the settlement drifted the tuneless whistle of a man. In the room of the Mex' place, Montana pulled his sleeve back over his sparse-haired head where beads of sweat showed. He eared back the hammer of his gun.

"I'm an old man, Hombre," he said slowly. "I ain't got much more in years to live—ner much to live for. So I don't give a heap what I do. Drilling you dead center wouldn't bother me so—"

The Hombre shoved back his flat-crowned hat lazily, yawning. He hadn't had a wink of shuteye in over thirty odd hours, after all. "What makes you think it ain't in Sebolt's grave?"

"We were there before we came upon you," said Barbara in her low voice. When Kirby flashed her a probing glance, she dropped her eyes.

"Somebody had already been at the grave," Montana picked it up. "They removed the second piece of that map, then covered up the hole an' tried to make it look like it was unopened. And it was *you*, by grab! Now, Hombre, if I have to gun-whup you till you're blind, we're gitting—"

Standing, The Hombre jerked at the buttons of his shirt and had it off his lean but well-corded shoulders with a quick motion. Before they understood, he had plucked open the buckle of his brass-studded shell belt, dropped it, then was opening the snakeskin belt at the front of his trousers.

"I'll strip down naked as a jay bird and you can search my rig, you pelicans," he snapped. "Then you'll see—"

Montana's companion made a half-choking sound and pulled her eyes away from The Hombre's hairy chest. She started for the door.

"Put your shirt back on!" barked Montana in a panic. "All right! You ain't got it on you. . .but then you must uh hid it somewheres back there afore them Leaning-E men joined you."

Rebuttoning his shirt, The Hombre shook his head as he sat down. Montana's brow furrowed and he did some growling under his breath. The Hombre was going through his pockets. He brought out a sack of Bull, then came up with a package of crumpled tailor-made cigarets. He shoved the latter at the girl disguised as a man.

"Figure you're growed-up enough to use a brain pill?" he said sneeringly.

BARBARA hesitated, then plucked out one of the tailor-made smokes with her gloved hand. Kirby tossed a match across the table to her. For a moment, she looked a little bewildered. Then she tried to scratch it on the greasy table top. It sputtered, then broke off short as the head hit a cut in the wood. The Hombre laughed lightly.

Montana punched the table with a heavy fist. "See here, Hombre. We ain't here to play games, by grab! Miss—uh—Young Sebolt an' me here, we're playing for keeps. You got that second piece of map somewheres. I know your breed."

"Yeah?" drawled Kirby. "How about getting some grub? My belly thinks my throat's been cut. I—"

"We'll settle this fust off, Kirby! I'd probably git a medal for killing a lobo like ya! Know that, don't you?"

" 'Lobo'?" said The Hombre softly.

Montana's gorge was mounting. "Sure. Tell us you're just a circuit-

riding Bible-poundin' preacher er something! But I know what ya are, Hombre."

"What?"

"A skulking coyote what backstabs the Law he once worked for! That's what!" His bullet head thrust forward belligerently.

"Got big ears for saloon bums' cheap talk, huh?"

"Cheap talk. . . Gonna tell me that 'bout a year back down in Acrombie you didn't snake that hoss-thief outa the cuartel?"

"Sure I did. . . The poor devil had stolen his first pony. But his wife down the line was on her death-bed. I knew that, so I got him out to go see her. . . Ain't got the brain pill fired up yet, have you?" he said, abruptly flicking his eyes to Barbara.

A faint rich tide ran up behind the olive skin of her face as she was caught watching him intently. "Waiting to get my tonsils irrigated with some tanglefoot juice first," she came back.

Montana gave the table another slam. "So you admit you bucked the Law!"

The Hombre gave him a solemn look, eyes hard and piercing for a moment. "Maybe the written Law made by men. . .but not the law of humanity."

Montana sputtered. "By grab, if—" He broke off with an apologetic look at Barbara. Then with a jerk of his chin he signalled her to go outside. He shifted his Colts in his calloused palm. "You an' me, Hombre, are going to have a real *pri*-vate parley an'—"

Again The Hombre yawned. "Look, Montana, if I had that second piece of map anywheres, I could make a copy of it—then swap the original with you for a copy of the first piece, if you happened to have one. *Sabe*?"

MONTANA flushed at having his hole card read so neatly. The girl was back at the table, watching every flicker of expression on the sharply-chiselled face of the man they'd captured.

"You got the fust piece of the map," Montana said.

Kirby shook his head, pushing back the loose yellow hair. Somehow, though sitting faced by Montana's gun muzzle, he had taken on a superior air. With an attitude of cold arrogance, he explained to them what had happened during the night. How Ruby Priest and his bunch had trapped him in the log-pole hut and the price of his escape.

"A man called Priest. . .and with gunhands—and he's on this trail of the graves too?" said Montana, plainly worried.

"Sure, two-bits," The Hombre casually flicked them with insult. "There's a big potato at the end of the line, and high-rollers have bought themselves chips. . . Well, like I was saying, I took Chopper along. Dumped him barefoot up a gulch. Then I hit the Leaning-E and was jumped by those gophers. Still don't know what put them on the prod."

Montana had the answer to that one. Years back, he had combed this piece of country with a posse after a rustler. So he knew a short-cut up from Capitan. They'd come that way. Stopping at a plow-chaser's for some grub, they'd learned about the trouble at the Leaning-E.

"Seems this fella, Embree, the owner, he only runs the place as a station in a rustlin' chain. They pick up the stuff down to the south, shift it up here, then work it north after things've cooled off and peddle it up around Golconda City. Some of the boys around here got wise and tipped off the Cattlemen's Protective." So Embree, with his gun-spread, was prepared to smoke down any man inside his fence-line to prevent evidence against him being gathered.

"I sabe," said The Hombre, rising as he stretched. "I—"

"Just what puts you on this Gunsmoke Trail?" Barbara shot suddenly.

"Same thing you two are after, I reckon. The pot of gold—whatever it is—at the other end."

"What right have you to go after it, a cheap adventurer outside the Law and—"

Derisively he blew a ribbon of quirly smoke in her direction. "Same right you have, I reckon."

"I'm a direct descendant of Myles Sebolt, one of the men in the original party up the Gunsmoke," she told him with cutting inflection. "So I have a stake by inheritance."

"By inheritance from the man whose grave you just robbed," said Montana in his always husky voice, coming back to the main issue.

The Hombre ignored him. "Same here," he came back glibly. "My mother was a Winrod. Daughter of Gordon Winrod who was on that first party too. So-o. . ."

"Wait a moment! Didn't One-Foot Hope say how—"

"And Mr Hope finally located you with the information from the dead Dal Fentriss?" the girl cut off fuming Montana smoothly.

The Hombre nodded, stretching again. Montana's chair scraped on the hard-packed floor as he kicked it back.

"This ain't getting nowheres about the piece of map from Myles Sebolt's grave! Now, Hombre, you better—"

"Put up your gun, Montana," Barbara ordered, adjusting a side of the red bandanna that hid her dark hair. "I believe The Hombre's story. Let's have Jesu get us some food. . ."

THE Hombre came to his feet from the pallet on the floor, hands instinctively digging for his empty holsters. At first he didn't know what had roused him from his heavy sleep in the backroom of Jesu's place. Slouched in a chair over by the doorway, Colts in his lap, Montana had his head half turned toward the road. But he kept one eye on The Hombre.

Then a second set of shots sprayed out. They came from the direction of the settlement. Shoving back his hair, Kirby slapped on his hat. "Give me my smokepoles, Montana. It might be the Leaning-E bunch, or maybe that Priest and his gun-slicks. Come on—wake up!"

Montana's eyes screwed up as he weighed it. His lip curled at The Hombre, but he finally dug The Hombre's Colts out from under the blanket on which he was sitting. Then he followed the latter out to the front room and into the yard. Lowering skies coated with thunderheads had blotted out the sun. A premature twilight dyed the flats and the mangy little pueblo of a settlement. There was another gun report.

Jesu came running down the road in his bare feet, clutching his straw sombrero. "Eet ees that son of a dog from the rancho, that hombre Boyd," he sputtered. Jesu said he was down at the cantina, drinking very heavily. And shooting bullets into the ceiling. It seemed he was celebrating some good luck, some chunk of dinero he had come into.

Kirby's face remained a mask save for his nostrils that flared like a hound sniffing the wind. "Let's amble down and take a looksee."

Montana looked around into the doorway. The girl was there, pretty face still puffed with sleepiness. "All right," he said gruffly as she gave him some signal.

The Hombre jabbed a finger at the girl dressed like a man. "Listen, you beardless jughead, you squat here! This is men's work." He and Montana Hannan went toward the settlement.

It was a one-story paintless joint with "Bar" crudely painted over the door where Boyd was. They could hear his guffawing and shouting out on the road. Through a begrimed front window they could see the spade-bearded foreman in the murky light of a ceiling lamp. Glass in hand, bottle in the other, he was gesticulating as he rocked back and forth.

The Hombre looked at Montana and jerked a thumb to a side alley. They pushed through some ragged grass and worked down it over tin cans and broken glass. Midway back, there was a window, its shutters open and the lower sash raised. Sombreros removed, the pair risked a look. They were opposite the bar across the low-ceiled room. Boyd and the backslappers about him had their backs to the pair. And Boyd's bragging voice carried to them plainly enough.

"—and I couldn't hardly believe it! This gent, he's willin' to pay me to

git something outa this ol' grave on our range. Pay me in good hard cash. Can you eemagine, huh?" Boyd crowed.

"How much, Boyd?"

"Never ya mind!" He sloshed down a drink and sleeved his chin. "Plenty for all the gila juice I can dump down, don't worry! Haw-haw!"

"Who was this jasper who went to the grave, Boyd?"

"Never mind 'bout that either, Joe. 'S one of the things he paid me for, not to tell who he was! Gimme another bottle here, Sammy! Haw!"

The Hombre and Montana ducked down. "We can jump him—"

"And make him talk at gun point," Montana finished for him. They both nodded, then raised up for another looksee, guns snaked out.

A newcomer was just sidling through the batwing doors of the murky place. The Hombre and Montana grunted an oath together. There could be no gunning then. The new arrival was Barbara Sebolt.

CHAPTER IX

"CAN'T make a play with the —the button in there, damn-it," fumed Montana. "He—well, he ain't so slick with a hogleg and—well. . ."

The Hombre nodded curtly. "And he might git in the way of some lead. Yeah. I'd like to warm his danged britches for him!"

An argument rose inside. Two of the ranch-hands with Boyd were trying to persuade him to come along home. Boyd cursed them out and dumped down some fresh liquor.

"We gotta git back," one of them pleaded. "Embree'll give us our time if he finds we're sticking around town here. Come on and—"

"Go tuh hell! And the Old Man can go soak his head in a bucket for all uh me!" Boyd retorted.

"But you been gulping the tanglefoot 'most all afternoon," the other hand argued. "And doing one heck of a lot of jaw-wagging too, Boyd!"

"Am I mentioning any names? Naw! Drag your tails back. Me, I'm staying around. G'wan! I'm a curly wolf an' it's my night to howl!"

The two cowhands, looking disgusted, went out. A moment later they passed up the road in the saddle.

Risking being spotted, Montana tried to wigwag the girl through the window, but she had bought a beer at the end of the bar and seated herself at a table in a dim corner where she could watch proceedings. Her game was plain to the pair outside. She hoped Boyd would drop the name of the man who'd paid him to get at the grave.

There was the drum of hoofbeats entering the settlement. A line of riders filed by the end of the alley. The Hombre started to move in the dimness.

"I'm going to go in and get him," he muttered.

Montana looked worried, then hissed. The Hombre shifted back and lifted his bared head above the window sill again. On the outside of the half-leaf front doors a tall man with a face as sad as a tombstone stood watching the celebrating Boyd. His dead eyes never shifted from the Leaning-E foreman. And Hombre Kirby knew those dead eyes. They belonged to Chopper, Ruby Priest's gun-ace. A moment later, Stucky's moon face appeared beside that of Chopper.

"Trouble," The Hombre whispered to Montana. And he told him who the men were. Montana sucked in his breath as his flat face paled.

RUBY PRIEST himself swaggered through the bat-wings, wearing a broad smirk. Beebe was with him. And three others trailed them while a fourth stepped inside and took up a position at the door, hands stemmed on jutting gun butts. All of them had the plain stamp of gun wolves. The Hombre recognized the red-headed one of them with the buck teeth that showed through his lips.

"Holy Jacks," he whispered to Montana. "That's him. The last I knew he was riding with the Billy Scott bunch, too."

"Scott the lobo?"

The Hombre nodded curtly. "Odds are getting heavier. . . The big shots are buying chips and sitting in, it looks."

The orey-eyed Boyd looked around at Beebe. "Hey, you was in here afore."

"Sure," said Beebe. "Drink up an' have one on me."

The girl had moved. Hat jammed down over her face, she rose and sized up the guard at the door. Then she eased behind the pack at the bar and made her way rearward for the door at the back of the place. She sensed trouble was a-building. She was reaching for the door handle when it was shoved open from outside. Another gun-slick stood there, his weapon drawn and held down against the seam of his black pants. He remained unmoving.

Barbara glided behind the screen of the opened door, then sidled along the back wall unnoticed. Her probing hand found another door. Easing it open, she slid through and pulled it shut behind her. Montana turned and went down the alley to the rear.

In the barroom, Ruby Priest had taken over. Beaming around as he tossed some goldback bills onto the bar, he waved everybody up for a drink. "Give the boys some red-eye, bar boss! Fix 'em up! Use up the dinero." Looking around, he spied the battered piano against a wall. "Hey, don't anybody here know how to tickle the keys? You, eh," as a hanger-on stepped up. Priest plucked a bottle from the bar and handed it to him. "Here! Take this an' get over there and make us some noise. Me, I made myself a big stake and I'm celebrating. Drink 'em down, gents! I'm Ruby Priest, the gambler! Drink up!"

The Hombre couldn't figure the game till he saw the swaying Boyd suddenly go rigid. Beebe had surreptitiously jabbed a Colts into his ribs. Priest and Stucky and Chopper had hedged in Boyd so nobody else could notice what was happening.

"You got a back room here, huh, boss?" Priest was speaking again. "We'll use it. Got to hold a little—uh—business confab. See that the boys get plenty of drinks now." He clapped Boyd on the shoulder. "Let's get the parley over with, pard." And the little procession with Boyd in the center moved toward the rear in the uproar as the tinny music rattled from the piano. As they entered the back room, The Hombre noticed Chopper limped.

BUT IT was no time for grinning. Both hoglegs out now, The Hombre waited for the yell from the back room when they found Montana's partner in there, but nothing happened. The door closed behind them. And two of the extra gunmen, including Holy Jacks, took up a position just outside it, watching the pack at the bar. The piano banged away discordantly.

Kirby went down the alley and into the back yard. Montana was there, peering around frantically in the grey dimness. "Uh—Young Sebolt ain't come out at all!"

The bleak light came into Hombre Kirby's eyes. He glanced at the single window of the backroom but it was shuttered. Then his eyes lifted and he pointed upward with a gun nose. At the back of the ramshackle place, a single-room addition to the building had been slapped up on the roof. It stood directly above the backroom. Stairs would run up from the latter, obviously. The girl must be up there.

The Hombre wasted no time in chin music. A small tree close to the back wall stemmed up close to the dark window of the room on the roof. Guns back in their holsters, Kirby was already shinnying his way up. Montana, grunting with the effort, came close behind him. Leaning out on a limb, The Hombre was able to tap on the window pane. Barbara Sebolt's face appeared dimly behind it. Terror was stamped on it but she promptly struggled at getting the ill-fitting window frame up.

"Climb out and git—" Montana started in a hushed voice.

The Hombre, though, was already swinging a leg over the sill. He dropped into the room. "I'd like to

kick your britches till your nose bled," he whispered hotly to the girl in the man's rig. "You sure tangled up things, by grab! You—"

For a moment she swayed against The Hombre's side. Then Montana was inside and holding her by an arm. She pointed at the room below. Light from it funnelled up through an open knot-hole in the thin flooring. "I think—I think they're going to kill him," she said in a small weak voice.

CHAPTER X

VOICES CAME from below, harsh and demanding. The Hombre recognized Priest's tone. Somebody cursed, and there was the sound of a blow. Then Priest, ordering:

"Stick your Bowie blade under his thumb-nail, Chopper! That'll bring him around." And without cessation the piano out in the barroom was pounded away.

Montana moved and a board creaked. The Hombre punched him sharply in the chest as a spear of light fell on the old-timer's shirt. It came from a battered panel in the door giving onto the stairs. Montana and the girl moved cautiously to it and put their faces against it, the former crouching under the girl to watch the proceedings below. The Hombre dropped quietly as a cat to put his eye against the knothole in the floor.

At the same instant there was a scream from Boyd. The knife had been jabbed under his thumbnail. When The Hombre got his eye focussed, he could see they had the Leaning-E foreman stretched on his back across a table in the room below. Boyd's eyes bugged from his head with terror. In contrast to his dirty black beard, his face was sheet-white.

"All right," said Priest, bending over him. "Now one of my boys heard you bragging before how you got paid to let a gent git at that grave. Now—"

'Don't k-know what you're talking about," said Boyd with chattering teeth. "I—"

Ruby Priest stepped back and Con Chopper stepped in. Swinging a fist downward from his forearm like a hammer, he slammed his hand against Boyd's teeth. Chopper looked at the underside of his hand and rubbed off the blood on his pant leg. Boyd moaned piteously. From over at the door a small choking sound issued from Barbara Sebolt.

"Now," Priest took it up again, rubbing the ruby on his shirt front and looking very smug. "Now, Mister Boyd, how's the memory? Who was he?"

Boyd worked his mashed mouth. A tooth in the front had been knocked out. "I—I never saw him afore. He—h-he just give me the dinero and—"

Priest sighed and applied a match to one of his tailor-made cigarets. "We ain't getting nowheres. He's yours, Chopper." And the gambler went over and dropped onto a chair in a corner.

IT WAS brutal. Chopper gravely offered Boyd a tin cup of redeye as the latter sat up unsteadily. The latter gullibly reached for it, and the contents struck him in the eyes, stinging and blinding. Chopper yanked him from the table onto the floor. Boots lashed out and fists drove. Boyd, reeling, managed to rise. His nose was mashed to a pulp as Beebe nailed him with a chair leg he used as a club. Boyd bounced off the walls. He was battered from man to man, slammed backward and forward, dragged to his feet when beaten down. And all the time the piano outside clattered away.

The Hombre looked up from the knothole to see the girl tugging at the door. "It's slow m-murder," she mumbled, sickened to the core. "You've got to—"

In a couple of strides, The Hombre was over there and had locked his big palm across her trembling lips. She tried to bite and he jerked her backward off balance and pulled her face around.

"Don't be a fool," he whispered angrily in the dimness. Poor Montana

stood indecisively, torn between loyalty and common sense.

"You've got to thop them-m,' the girl mouthed against Kirby's palm. "Youth goth—"

He shook his head. After all, for one thing he knew about the gunmen on guard outside the door below. "Shut up, button! Boyd's a dirty little rat, anyway. And *we've* got to find where that second piece is too!"

She pulled her mouth free, The Hombre permitting it as she seemed to get calm. "Montan!" she ordered in a fierce whisper. "Go down! We can get the jump on them and—" And the old-timer, instinctively loyal, put his hand on the door handle, on the verge of obeying from habit.

The Hombre's gun jumped into his left hand. "*I've* got the jump now," he said in a cold harsh whisper. Jerking the girl's chin up sharply with his right hand, he struck her a light but stinging blow over the cheek. "Be a man—you're on man's business, you lily-livered younker! This ain't a church-meeting choir practise. . . "

Very slim and defiant in her man's outfit, she stood quivering. The Hombre thumbed toward the open window. He ordered her to get back to Jesu's and have him get their ponies saddled up. Half hypnotized, she took a couple of steps past the stoop-shouldered man. Then she remembered who and what she was and started to twist back.

"I will not—"

THE HOMBRE put the sole of his boot against the seat of her jeans and thrust. She was catapulted to the window, clutching at the frame. Casually Kirby had shifted his gun muzzle to cover Montana. The latter was glowering, but Barbara obediently slid over the sill and reached for the tree and started down. The Hombre walked over to the door to watch through the crack over Montana. "That button needs breaking to the bit." Montana had to grin a little.

Below, Boyd had been revived by forcing some redeye down his throat. His face looked like a piece of raw torn meat you'd see hanging in a butcher shop. They had him back on the table again, Ruby Priest standing over him. The Hombre realized that whoever he was, Boyd was scared to death of the hairpin who'd paid to get at that grave, in fear of his very life.

"Common now," Ruby Priest addressed him coaxingly. "We don't really *want* to thrash you to a danged pulp. Who was the gent?" He had to raise his voice a notch at the end as the piano outside was thumped wildly on the bass keys. They were all busy outside getting drunk as coots on somebody else's dinero.

Half lying on an elbow, Boyd just fingered his mashed face gingerly. One of his eyes was completely closed. His shirt and vest looked as if somebody had spattered red paint over them.

"Maybe Mr. Boyd would enjoy a smoke." Priest carefully lit up a fresh one of his and moved it toward the captive's cut mouth. Poor Boyd bit again, painfully opening his lips to receive it. At the last instant, Priest jabbed the lighted coal up one of Boyd's nostrils.

Beside him, The Hombre could feel Montana galvanize and quiver at the savagery. Below, when Boyd recovered, half fainting, he got out weak croaking words.

"What good would his name do, anyways? He could uh give me any handle—if I remembered it. Wouldn't have ta be his own. He—" Boyd was a slick one.

But Priest knew by then that Boyd actually knew who the man was. "The gun trick," the gambling king said wearily to Chopper.

Chopper went about his business efficiently and without rush. Extracting the shells from his hogleg, he took his Bowie and worked the lead noses out of two cartridges. It left the brass shell and the gunpowder inside it. He spoke to Beebe. Beebe roughly tore open Boyd's shirt and then his undershirt, buttons popping, to expose the man's hairy belly. Looking more like an undertaker than ever, Chopper placed the gun muzzle firmly against the flesh and triggered.

There was a muffled report. A weird inhuman but feeble screech from the victim. He writhed, exposing the burned lead-pocked bleeding flesh of his belly. And then the two words, as the piano outside suddenly ceased, drooled from his misshapen mouth.

"George Cronkhite. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

THAT MADE another party prowling up the Gunsmoke Trail for the mysterious treasure that lay at the end of it.

As the three of them rode through the starless night, The Hombre speculated on that. He knew who Cronkhite was; former lieutenant of Patch McQuade, and a dangerous if mild-looking man. Kirby had already told Montana Hannan something about who Cronkhite was. Now Montana rode with his mouth bracketed by grim furrows. The danger seemed to increase with almost every mile. Barbara Sebolt rode a little out front. She hadn't spoken to Kirby since the episode in the little room atop the bar back there.

The trail was bending toward the northwest, moving around a big elbow of the spiny ridge that poked up against the night sky on the left. They had left the flats behind and mounted steadily among low hills. On the right was a broad brush-dotted valley spiked with an occasional chimney butte. The Hombre whistled softly through the steady *clop-clop-pity* of the pony hoofs. It was one of the few evidences of tautened nerves, a misleading one, that he ever gave—because he smelled a showdown in the offing. One party would make a stab at cutting down some of its rivals.

"George Cronkhite," he muttered to himself once. "And Billy Scott backing Priest's play, it looks, too. . . Yeah. . . " The way the power gents were moving into the picture reminded him of how thunderheads will come sailing from behind hills on a sultry day out on the range. Then there's one big clap as if the lid of the earth's been blasted off, and suddenly everything is dripping wet, bowed under the weight of water. Musing on that, he stared at the narrow back of Montana's companion ahead and swore under his breath.

When Barbara Sebolt began to sag over the saddle horn from weariness, they had to make camp. They had passed a small ranch-house set on a slope; Montana wanted to go back there.

"And leave as good as a signpost for Ruby Priest when he comes along, chunkhead?" Kirby told him harshly. "This ain't a little bunkhouse game of penny ante stud, mosshorn!"

The girl's eyes raked him across three feet of night. "Who made you captain, Mr. Kirby?"

He pinched out his quirly. "Nobody. . . And I ain't got no objections about riding on alone, either."

"What do we do, Hombre?" Montana said without rancor. He was admitting that, tacitly, they had thrown in together—admitting too that he and Miss Barbara needed this strange Kirby.

He motioned with his head and they moved on until he pointed out the haystacks in a meadow across a little creek. Montana burrowed a hole into a stack for the girl and they turned in. . . .

THE WIRE-TOUGH old Montana was up shortly after sunrise, but The Hombre had already risen and disappeared. Montana had a gun half-drawn before he realized that Kirby had not left them because his coal-black mare was still picketed over there in the stand of trees.

The Hombre was down creek a piece where it cut through a stand of woodland. There he had found a pool deep enough to bathe in. Out on the grass behind him, his fresh-washed shirt was already steaming under the sun. He bent over the pool on his knees, scraping at his beard stubble carefully with a razor. He went over his lean face twice before he was satisfied, then combed his wet hair. When he got back to the haystack, Montana's companion had gone off to wash at another spot. The old-timer was cooking up breakfast. The

aroma from the bubbling pot of java was good.

Spreading a folded saddle blanket on the grass, The Hombre squatted cross-legged in front of it as he drew out a deck of cards, began to shuffle with effortless dexterity and speed. Montana cocked a puzzled eye at him. The Hombre dealt them out in five neat stacks, face down. Picked up the first of them and cut them. Fanned them out in a gambler's rosette.

"Pick three," he told Montana laconically. When the latter reached over and complied, The Hombre set the three aside without inspecting them. He went through the same rigamarole with the other piles.

Face shining from the cold water, Barbara came up and stared. The Hombre had her pick three from the last pile. Then he shuffled the fifteen cards drawn and laid them out face up, side by side. Every fifth card he removed and placed to one side.

"A new kind of game?" Barbara ventured.

"Not with me," Kirby muttered, not even glancing up. His mouth pursed as he studied the twelve left. Then he picked up the rest of the deck that had been discarded from the five stacks and reshuffled slowly.

"Breakfast is ready," said Montana as he poured the java. Kirby gave no heed, even when the old-timer repeated it. Montana gave a sign and he and the girl began to eat, watching the deepening frown that cut horizontal gullies in Kirby's forehead.

Sweat filmed The Hombre's features, despite the cool morning. Slowly he began to flick the red cards out of the discard he held.

"Don't you aim to eat, Mr. Kirby?" the girl asked.

No response. He tapped a diamond jack in the layout of twelve left on the blanket. Abruptly he turned and stabbed the pack of spades and clubs he held. "Take one," he ordered the girl sharply. When she did, he snatched it from her fingers and threw it face up on the blanket. The club seven. The Hombre's nostrils thinned as he inhaled hard. Then he sat absolutely motionless for a full minute.

WHEN HE did move, it was to rake the cards together and drop the whole deck onto the blanket. Rising he came over and got his cup of java and swallowed half of it without seeming to realize how steaming hot it was. Studying him, Montana realized the man looked as suddenly weary and spent as if he had been in the saddle a day and a night.

"No sense in going to the third grave, Simon Lester's," Kirby said after some moments, staring at the ground. That grave was the one outside a place once known as Collinsville. The town had since been burnt out and abandoned. "We'd only be a-wasting our time."

"Why?" Barbara hadn't consciously used the hushed tone.

"That piece of the map will be gone from that grave."

Montana cleared his throat. "Did them—them cyards tell you that, Hombre?"

The Hombre didn't answer directly. Spooning up some beans, he shrugged. "Cronkhite had a head start. How long a one, we don't know, but the odds are heavy 'gainst our beating him to the third grave. . . . We'd only be a-wasting our time." He repeated that last like a man in a trance.

It was still for some moments as they ate, so still a sagehen could be heard rustling in the grass. The eyes of the girl and Montana kept shifting furtively to the cards still laying on the saddle blanket. It seemed like so much gully-wash, that a future event could be predicted from those pasteboards. But there was something terribly convincing in the solemn demeanor of The Hombre.

Finally, Barbara spoke. "If we don't go to Lester's grave—what do we do?"

"Hit straight for Coyote Hill. Winrod was buried in Boothill there," The Hombre spat out curtly. He walked off to get the ponies from the

picket line as if everything was decided.

"But Cronkhite'll get the piece of map from that grave—if the other party doesn't," the girl said as they saddled up.

"Drag that cinch tighter," Kirby told her. "Shucks! We know now that Cronkhite's got the piece of map from the second grave, don't we? So we got to deal with him sometime—one way or the other."

The girl's eyes puckered as she sought to think it out.

THE HOMBRE looked impatient. "Look. Ruby Priest has the piece of map from Benson's grave, the first one. Maybe you've got—"

She nodded. "Yes, we've got a copy of the one you took!"

She meant it as a cut, he smiled thinly. "All right. Conkhite's got piece number two. And as good as piece number three. So far, he's high man. But if we get the piece from the fourth grave, we got his cards equalled, and he still hasn't got the first piece from the first grave. So-o—well, sometime not too far off, they's got to be an all-fired—"

"Showdown," Montana finished for him grimly.

"And I ain't forgetting," Kirby added, "that Billy Scott has bought himself chips in the danged game. . . Button," he jerked his head at the girl, "maybe you'd better put your pants in the hull and turn south. This is a man's game; trot home and git weaned, huh?"

Barbara's quirt hissed as she drew her arm backward. But The Hombre only stood at ease, smiling down at her mockingly. She turned, flushing, and swung into the kak. . . .

CHAPTER XII

IT WAS after noontime two days later when they rode through a pass between low sharp-sided hills and saw Coyote Hill. It lay on the other side of a narrow but fast-running deep stream, sprawling up from the far bank over a big gentle-sloped hill. Its main street arched up into a canyon where the second-growth timber began. Even as they looked a puff of gunsmoke rose at one of the corners of the town opposite the pass. A few moments later the report of the gunshot drifted to them.

"It's a hell town," The Hombre muttered to Montana as the two sat their ponies a little off from Barbara Sebolt.

'Uh huh." Montana's eyes followed Kirby's to the girl surveying the scene. "We'll have to be careful." His gaze switched ahead again and he lifted an arm to point out the crosses of the town's burial ground up on a sandy mound to the north of the main street. Kirby nodded.

They rode down the winding road, angling around huge rock outcroppings, to the stream. On the edge of one of the steep rock banks was a small two-storied place. A sign, creaking in the wind over the doorway, proclaimed it "The Shamrock Bar, J. Darcy, Prop." It was a neat sign and there were fresh white curtains at the windows of the upper story. The Hombre noted those things and gave Montana a sign.

Impatient, Barbara Sebolt protested as they dismounted. "Montana, we've got business to attend to! I thought speed was everything, Mr. Kirby. . . . Montan, you didn't use to need Dutch courage before you nosed into trouble."

"Now—uh—kid," Montana said sheepishly. And they went in, Kirby's spurs rattling over a scrubbed floor as he led the way. There were no other customers. Propped against the center mirror of the bar was a carefully lettered sign. It read: "Nothing is on the house but the roof—and we aim to keep that there. Fair warning. . . Jonathan Darcy, Proprietor." Kirby grinned a little.

Darcy himself appeared abruptly, as if by magic. He had been bent behind the bar counter, at work, out of sight. He straightened to beam at them. "Howdy, gents. What's your pleasure? Best five-cent whisky south of the Peace River for two-bits a throw!"

This Darcy was a great ox of a man, ruddy-cheeked, eyes smiling be-

hind a pair of spectacles, arms like tree limbs projecting from the rolled-up sleeves of his fresh shirt. He looked around thirty. The sight of him sent Hombre Kirby's thoughts back to his childhood, to when he'd been a boy in school and read those books about the old days of Merrie England and Robin Hood and Friar Tuck. This Darcy reminded him of the tavern owners of those days, the genial mine host, lords of their establishments, large-girthed and jovial, but quite capable of laying down the law if circumstances necessitated it.

"Give us some of the two-bit stuff —at two-bits a throw," The Hombre told him. "How's things over in the town?"

"That pest-hole stinks a little worse than usual," Darcy said, flipping a bottle in a double spin as he shoved forward glasses. "Just two, eh?" as Barbara, disguised as a man, shook her head. "Yee-up. Stinks worse now. Billy Scott the outlaw's come in and staying in town; gives Coyote Hill the general atmosphere of a skunk's boudoir. Yee-up."

Montana cocked on eye. It was pretty free talk. Scott was top dog along the Gunsmoke. "Ain't afeared of him at all, huh?"

"'Friad of him?" Darcy's eyes danced behind his spectacles. "Why, a friend of mine walked up to Billy Scott and slapped him smack in the mouth. Sure."

"Sure like to shake that fella's hand; he packed nerve," The Hombre said.

"Shake his hand?" Darcy shook his head. "Hell, we couldn't dig him up just for that. Nope. Drink hearty, gents!" And he dumped down a hearty shot he'd poured himself. "Just to show you it ain't poison."

They had another, swapping more badinage with big Darcy. Then The Hombre asked him if maybe he had rooms to rent. Darcy pursed his mouth.

"To the right kind of customers, yee-up. . . You don't look as if you've stolen any horses lately. Follow me."

It was a fresh swept room on the second floor overlooking the road. Barbara was bridling when the owner went off downstairs.

"You aren't going to leave me—"

The Hombre sighed wearily. "Look, doggie. Cronkhite's a-going to be dusting in right soon. He's a gunman. And mebbe that Ruby Priest got the same idee we did and come straight through 'stead of branching off to go to the grave at Collinsville. So he may be squatting in Coyote Hill right now. That cemetery might turn out to be one unhealthy place and—"

Her lip curled. "Hombre, you could talk a bird off a bush. But I can take care of myself and—"

Montana said, "We don't want to put all our eggs in one basket, don't you see? If—well, if anything happens one of us could git the map back to you."

"Well then, you stay and I'll go in with the Hombre—"

Kirby made a threatening grab for her. "You do as we say, half-pint, or I'll steal that fancy red neckerchief right plumb off your head!" She backed, fearful of having her sex revealed. Chuckling, The Hombre closed the door after himself and Montana. "Keep an eye on that button upstairs," he told the ample Darcy as they mounted. "Don't let him stray and hogtie him if necessary."

CROSSING THE bridge, he and Montana rode up the hill into Coyote City in silence. It was a bustling place with plenty of evidence there was free-moving dinero about. It was right on the east-west road that came down from the rail line at Culpepper to feed into rich grazing lands of Buckskin Valley further on to the west. Freighter wagons passed along it steadily. Yet Coyote Hill had the look of a bleary-eyed slattern.

It was because it was a gun town, still—as it always had been—a roost for the outlaw scum of two states. Whisky mills, honky-tonks, and gambling hells elbowed each other for space along the main road. Few of the buildings had been painted in years. Spindles were missing from the porch railing of the sole hotel,

The Palace House. A lone church had been boarded up so long that its front steps had fallen in with decay. Anywhere a man looked he might see the telltale stitching of bullets in a building or cabin.

The pair moved up the hill past the freighter wagons and crowded hitchrails. On the steps of a honky tonk was a fresh splash of red; they turned along a side street to the left, pushing northward. It dwindled to an alley petering out between hovels. Then it was just a footpath working across the side of the hill through brush and scrub oak. A bend past a piece of lava outcropping and there was Coyote Hill's Boothill.

"You—you know where Winrod's grave is?" said Montana a little hesitantly.

"Sure," said The Hombre. The instructions in the layout of the graves along the Gunsmoke said Gordon Winrod had been laid to rest in a hollow in the town's burial ground. And that the grave mound was just a few yards from a piece of rock on which somebody, sometime, had chiselled "May They Rest With The Lord." That made it appear pretty simple.

DISMOUNTING, they moved into the weed-grown cemetery under the glare of the sullen sun which was almost like a blow. Montana thought he had found the hollow up under a dead pine on the sandy mound, but it was in reality nothing but a small wash, a rain-scoured shallow ditch a couple of feet wide. There were no graves whatsoever in it.

At first they moved around together, then they split up to cover more ground. Sweat began to leave dark blotches on their shirts. Every so often a vagrant puff of wind would send little dust twisters spiralling across the graves, blinding them. Once The Hombre called out as he found a shallow indentation over by the east end of the town Boothill, but it was no clue. There was no rock around that could have born the inscription.

The pair finally got together down at one corner of the mound. Montana sleeved his mouth, saying he wished they'd brought along a canteen. The Hombre fanned himself with his flat-crowned sombrero.

"Reckon we'll have to check every danged last grave, Montana. Most of 'em are marked with names on the crosses. By elimination, if nothing else. . . . " Montana nodded and they went to work, moving parallel along the ragged paths of the cemetery. It was slow painstaking work; some of the crosses had fallen and had to be lifted to read their inscriptions. Other graves were scarcely recognizable, the mounds almost obliterated by years of weather and rain, the rotting crosses hidden in rank grass.

Their backs began to ache. Sweat ran from their straining eyes. Montana was limping on a blistered heel, unaccustomed to so much walking in the high-heeled boots. They worked back down the mound, throats parched to hoarseness with the dust. "Hey! Here—" Then The Hombre wanted to curse. It was a little tombstone that had caught his eye. At first, the name cut into the gray stone had seemed like "Winrod." But a closer look showed it was "Winross." And anyway, Kirby realized a second later, the original party up the Gunsmoke Trail would have had no way of procuring a tombstone.

Finally Montana stumbled over to grip a piece of jackpine, panting under the still hot westering sun. The Hombre's mouth was a grim slit when he joined him. They had curry-combed the place. There had been some unmarked graves, but none of them fitted the description of the place where Gordon Winrod had been laid to rest.

"It's gotta be here—someplace," Montana muttered.

"Yeah. Yeah. But. . . Say, did you look over them old graves up there in that little spur?" He pointed to where a handful of graves spilled out into brush at the upper corner over the edge of the mound.

Montana nodded his sweaty face. "Well, sorta. Didn't need to waste no time because there was no rock around 'em."

"Can't imagine no one stealing a

rock. But let's take a good look anyway. Winrod's grave couldn't have plumb disappeared."

They pushed weary legs upgrade through the shifting sand and probed into the undergrowth. Montana had removed his gun-weighted holsters and hung them with his shell belt over a cross further down. He stared at them as he emerged from the brush and dropped onto a stump. Their last investigation had been fruitless.

"It's just gotta be here. This is Coyote Hill and—"

THE Hombre never finished the remark. There was the wicked whispering hiss of a bullet. A chunk of wood jumping from the side of the stump on which Montana squatted, and then the crash of a gun sounded over the somnolence of Boothill.

Hombre Kirby was already diving for the sand as a second slug cut the air where his head had been. Montana made a dive from the stump, grabbing for his hoglegs before he realized he didn't have them. The Hombre's guns jumped out as a yell came. A slug geysered sand beside the clump of sagebrush behind which Montana lay, and Kirby's cracks of blue eyes picked out the red head of Holy Jacks, a Billy Scott gun-slick, off in the brush to the left of the burial ground.

One of Kirby's weapons barked and the red head ducked from view. But fresh lead sang in from the right, from the north side of the sandy mound. Up there a man leaped from one sand hill to another; he looked mighty like big Ruby Priest.

What had happened was plain. While he and Montana had been so intent on locating the Winrod grave, Priest and his party had come along, sighted them, and laid an ambush. Rising on one knee from the brush, The Hombre cracked down on another gunman firing from the top of the mound. He got a reply from a third direction, from across the track opposite the cemetery. Two bullets arrowed at him, one of them nicking the sleeve of his shirt. They were in a tight for fair, and one of them gunless.

"Cover me, Hombre!" Montana yelled back in his husky voice. Then, before Kirby could stop him, he was scrambling out on all fours. Running in leaps and bounds, tripping and darting from side to side, over and around the graves of Coyote Hill's cemetery. Once he careened sideward and hit the ground. Riding his triggers furiously, The Hombre thought he was hit. But tough old Montana rose to rush on, bent double.

One of The Hombre's hoglegs clicked empty. With the other he sent a chunk of lead tearing down at a figure rising to get Montana from the bottom side of the cemetery. The way the man spun before he ducked to cover The Hombre knew he had wounded him. Then Montana had reached the cross where his hoglegs hung and grabbed them and dived into that little wash.

Reloading swiftly, Hombre Kirby worked backward into the spur of scrub off the graveyard. Further behind him he caught faint cracklings through the spotty gunfire as some of them crept in, but he realized they were too heavily outnumbered for a stand-up showdown scrap. Especially with Montana stuck out there in the middle of the cemetery. Bellying through the tall browned grass, he worked downgrade to outflank those at the base of the mound.

He held his fire to conceal his position. It was almost fatal for Montana. Ruby Priest had sent some of his gunmen working down the snaky dry wash from the top of the cemetery. Montana was in danger of being flanked. Then The Hombre rose from behind a clump of jackpine and rushed from the side at three men gunning from the base of the mound.

One of them wheeled toward him just in time to have half his face blasted away by one of Kirby's slugs. Another, about to cut down on Montana as he was forced to bob up from cover by the fire from above, swivelled his Colts to throw down on Kirby. The man's first shot missed. A split second later, The Hombre's bullet gashed a hole in his Stetson and the man dived for the grass. The

Hombre plunged on, and the third man, sighting him through the brush, had already turned to scurry frantically away into a nest of boulders. Kirby recognized him as Con Chopper.

The Hombre shouted to Montana to come. Montana scampered down the shallow wash. Kirby sent a couple of slugs burning across the track at the hairpins skulking there, then the pair made a rush for their ponies and hit the leather and wheeled to bolt down to Coyote Hill. Behind Ruby Priest rose from behind a sandhill and cursed with shrill frustration.

Chapter XIII

ALONG the road the buildings on the east side had their windows tinted a bloody hue by the after-glow of the setting sun. But in *The Black Jack*, the oil lights of the big glittering chandeliers had already been lit. The waxy-faced "perfessor" was thumping his piano steadily as the orchestra tuned up for the evenings dancing. Empty spots at the tables in the gambling wing off to one side were filling and the *clackety-clack* clicking of the roulette wheel had speeded up. And the crowd along the seventy-foot bar was bellied elbow to elbow.

Hombre Kirby was one of them. He had sent Montana back to the bar across the creek. It had taken some arguing. "The—Young Sebolt, you got to protect him. Priest might smell out where we are holing up," he'd told Montana. Montana had been worried, too, about The Hombre's safety with Priest gunmen prowling the town.

"Stop sweating," Kirby had advised him. "They might try to jump me—but not kill me. If they did the latter, I couldn't lead them to you, and they don't know where the map piece from that third grave is." So Montana had gone along. And now The Hombre himself stood sipping a drink in *The Black Jack* and trying to add it up. The missing grave had upset his plans badly. Figuring to reach it first, with Montana of course, he had meant to remove the map, then bait a trap. In short, to wait till Cronkhite came along and jump him. If they had found the grave and Ruby Priest had been the next to turn up, he'd meant to capture Priest and hold him as a hostage.

Now, all that was out. The next move was in the lap of Fate. And he and Montana, The Hombre realized, were left holding the low cards in the game. Ruby Priest had the original map from the first grave plus a spread of gunmen, and possibly Billy Scott, backing his play. The tricky Cronkhite was a vague indeterminate factor, but he possessed the maps from graves number two and three beyond a doubt. The Hombre hadn't forgotten what the cards had told him.

One of Kirby's fisted hands ground into the bar counter. He should have cut down Cronkhite when he gave it to Patch McQuade and his half brother. If Cronkhite were dead—

"Talk of speaking of the devil," Hombre Kirby said to himself. For in the bar mirror, his roving restless eyes had picked up the reflection of George Cronkhite coming down the line. The Hombre wheeled out, hands splaying over his holster tops.

CRONKHITE'S happening along was no accident; he had been looking for The Hombre. Halting, soft-faced as ever, pulling at his sad mustaches, he regarded him. "Don't make no bad moves, Hombre," he said quietly. "You're covered—from two angles." He made a vague motion with his thumb twice.

The Hombre's head turned slowly. The place was well-thronged now and hussies were already dragging partners onto the dance floor. A swarthy-faced man with a goiter lump on the side of his neck sat at one of the tables with a checkered cloth at the edge of the dance floor. His right hand was out of sight beneath the table, nobody had to tell The Hombre the unseen hand held a gun. He looked further around at where Cronkhite had made his second gesture. A little man with the sparkle

of a gold tooth showing beneath his black thread of mustache stood lounging against a post. His right hand was in his coat pocket, and Kirby knew he was covered from that angle too.

Cronkhite smiled in an empty way and stepped to the bar at The Hombre's side. "This round's mine, Hombre. . . Saw you from the balcony."

The Hombre chuckled. "Better luck than I expected."

" 'Better luck. . .' You call this good luck? Mister, I hold all the aces this hand."

The Hombre shook his head negatively. "I got twelve—six in each holster. . . Bullets."

"You're covered, Hombre! Didn't cha see?"

"But I could drill you afore they got me, Cronkhite."

"But you'd die, Hombre! You'd as good as commit suicide."

"Wouldn't you die, Cronkhite?" The Hombre purred.

"Why—I—you—I g u e s s. . . . " Cronkhite swallowed with difficulty and tugged at a mustache end. He grabbed up his drink and took it in a gulp. "Look, we can talk business."

"Go ahead."

" You got the map from number one grave, I reckon."

"Not on me, but I know where I can get it."

"All right. Let's be smart, Hombre. I got the map pieces from the second and third graves."

"They're no good without the first piece."

"And the first piece alone—'s about as useful as an empty shell, Hombre. With just that, you ain't going noplace."

.."*Just* that? How about the fourth piece, Cronkhite? You think you're going to get that?"

Cronkhite shrugged. "Maybe nobody's a-going to git that one. I know you ain't got it—nor nobody else."

"Like to lay a little bet on it, Cronkhite?"

"You're the kind who tries to fill an inside flush, Hombre? Nobody's got it 'cause Winrod's grave ain't in the cemetery. I telegraphed a friend here when I was in Collinsville. Ain't no Winrod grave up there." He tongued his puffy lips slowly.

IT WAS The Hombre's move. He shoved his glass away. "Then why waste my time with this palaver about talking business. "Cronkhite, you're strictly a two-bit, small bore. You—"

"Don't leave till I tell you you can, Hombre!"

The Hombre's thin smile never changed. Then one of his hands shot up. Cronkhite ducked backward from the waist up, and Kirby calmly pushed his hat back onto his shoulders, raking his loose yellow hair. Laughed. "Should know better 'n to give orders to your betters, Cronk."

Cronkhite's eyes seemed to twist in their sockets. His soft-fleshed face puffed with fury. "My boys got you covered. Forgot?"

"Forgot I told you I could drop you afore they could put my light out, Cronk?" He blew quirly smoke in the man's face. "Sure, they'd get *me* finally. But *you* wouldn't be around to know about it, Cronk. Wanta call me on that?"

The music stopped and Cronkhite made a *glug* sound as he tried to get his voice out of his throat. For a moment, his eyes flickered venomously. But he knew enough of The Hombre to know he'd try it if called. Cronkhite labored to raise a smile on his pasty features.

"Both of us dead wouldn't do either of us no good, Hombre. . . . Look. You got the number one piece. I need it. I got the number two and three pieces. You need 'em. Maybe we can make a deal."

"Name it."

"I'll let you copy the second and third pieces—in return for a copy of the first piece a-and *two thousand dollars.*"

The Hombre let his eyes drift around the room. Priest wouldn't show yet, the way he figured it. He and his men would be up there hunting for the Winrod grave as night settled. He could imagine how they'd be breaking their backs holding matches or a candle to each cross up there.

"Well?" prodded Cronkhite.

The Hombre shrugged. "Two thousand. . . You think I tote a private gold mine around with me?" He let his eyes drift again. Out there dancing with a redhead with black lace stockings was a man he recognized as Lefferts, a gunman wanted for a double killing over in Cochise County. Seated at a nearby table with a dance-hall girl on his lap was a little hairy gent with doleful sunken eyes. He was Simon Brant, wanted in three states as a rustler. Two long-legged hairpins in black coats strode past along the bar. They were the Bradley boys, twins, a pair of wire-tough *muchachos*. Tom had done time in prison twice. They hired their guns to anybody with the price.

The town was loaded with the owl-hoot ilk all right. Little wonder *The Black Jack* had so many of its house guards scattered about.

"A copy of the first piece—and two thousand," repeated Cronkhite impatiently. "Take it or leave it, Hombre. . . You can git me any time tonight up at Tom Crowley's livery barn." He walked off, signing to his two gunman, then almost bumped into another who lived by the gun. The Hombre spotted him as Wex Clay, one-time marshal over in the Washita, who'd gone crooked. Cronkhite passed a few words with him before going on.

The Hombre turned back to the bar thoughtfully. Cronkhite actually had them over a barrel for fair; no question of it. He had two pieces to their one. Of course, he had to have that one, the segment of map or a copy from the first, Benson's grave. But, then, there was always the chance he might strike some kind of a bargain with Ruby Priest. The Hombre's teeth bared at that thought. He hoisted his shot glass and emptied it. Through the bottom of it he saw a man down the line flip a hundred-dollar bill across the bar. The bar boss slapped it in the till as casually as if it were a dobie dollar, and that till was crammed with stacks of bills.

Kirby's teeth met with a click. He turned and left. . . .

AS HE, Montana, and the disguised girl ate dinner in Darcy's place, Kirby had little to say. Barbara herself ceased to eat after a few forkfuls, sitting with a worried furrow between her eyebrows. She was bitterly discouraged, losing her last shred of hope when Kirby made known George Cronkhite's offer. Two thousand dollars? Cronkhite might as well have demanded a piece of the moon.

The Hombre lowered the piece of steak on his fork and ambled over to the bar where Jonathan Darcy busily polished glasses. They had a few words as the boss poured a drink. The Hombre came back. As he and Montana built quirlies over their cups of java, Darcy spoke to Barbara.

"Say, button, I got a new puppy out in the shed. Real purty little cuss. Like to see him?" he offered. Barbara's face lighted with a faint smile and she followed Darcy through the doorway of the kitchen next to the barroom.

The Hombre leaned across the table but it was Montana who spoke first. "Cronkhite's got the map piece from the third grave, eh. . . . Then your cards—they wasn't lying."

"That's right, Montan."

Montana sucked his breath, then knuckled his sparsely thatched skull. "Look. This Cronkhite, he trades up piece two for piece one—then he sells us a copy of piece three. . . . well, that puts us even up with him. . . . What's his idee?"

"He wants dinero—to hire himself more gunhands. Git himself a regular gun spread. Then he figures he can whip anybody else on the trail. *Sabe?*"

Montana nodded. "Well, don't make much difference anyways—to us. We ain't got the two thousand and—"

A roguish glitter came into the faded blue eyes of The Hombre. "'S why I got Darcy to take—take Young Sebolt outside. We better go get that dinero."

"Go get—" Montana's faded eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead. He regarded The Hombre as if he might be touched with the sun.

"We hold up *The Black Jack,*" said The Hombre.

"Wh-what? Hold up—Listen, that's law-breaking! You—"

"Keep your britches on, Montan. . . . . Billy Scott the lobo is a part owner of the place. The other partner is a one-time knifeman from the Panhandle. Killed his own wife, too. They failed to convict him 'cause the State's three witnesses disappeared before the trial. Two of 'em was found shot dead out in the brush. You figure it."

Montana picked his teeth thoughtfully.

"The place is a dirty trap. Ain't a square game operating in it; a man gits drunk and it's a ten-to-one shot the house guards'll roll him when they git him in the alley. . . . Jumping that place—you call it law-breaking?"

When Montana lifted his eyes, they were twinkling too. "I'm a greenhorn at this kinda stuff, Hombre. . . . By grab, you're hard. And cold. Like creek water in a January freeze, by grab!"

The Hombre rose, humming lightly. "Let's get the dinero."

CHAPTER XIV

SOMBRERO SO awry on his head it lay half on his shoulder, The Hombre slipped into the side door of the big sprawling *Black Jack*. Opposite the side entrance, Montana lolled against a post at the edge of the dance floor. He gave Kirby a nod, meaning he had his man picked out. Their plans had been cooked up en route from Darcy's place.

Lurching drunkenly, The Hombre began to sing to the music at the top of his lungs in the general uproar. He made a pawing gesture at a passing brassy-haired, glassy-eyed blond, grabbing a strap of her evening gown. The next moment he got a blow across the back of the neck, and a flat-bodied gent in a black shirt, a house guard, was snapping him around and propelling him toward the side door. Kirby let himself go along on wobbling legs without resistance.

"Git out and stay out, bum!" ordered the guard as he shoved him into the alley. "Ya lowdown—"

Springing around like a cat, The Hombre grasped his still outstretched arm. The man was yanked into the dark alley, then, with a trip, sent stumbling toward the rear of it. He got out a half yell when The Hombre's fist nailed him alongside the jaw. As the man sagged, fumbling at his open-topped holster, The Hombre was hauling his gun and raising the barrel like a club.

When he re-entered the place, he was alone, hat low over his eyebrows, obviously sober. Montana got his nod, winked, and turned to the dance floor a-seethe with figures. A little hammer-headed gent, plainly half orey-eyed, came jigging around the floor with a buxom brunette. Moving out, Montana pinioned him by the shoulder.

"Hey, you! Been hunting ya a heap long time! An' I oughta shoot you dead where you stand!" Montana bellowed.

The hammer-headed hairpin went a dirty gray color, eyes weaving as he sought an avenue of escape. "Who're ya? What in hell do ya—"

"Don't try to bluff me, by grab!" roared Montana, seizing the man by the lapels of the coat and backing against a table to protect himself from the rear. "You're the coyote who killed the teller in the Creosote Canyon bank over in the Territory—then let 'em hang my pard for the job! Ya—"

"You're locoed!" screeched the other, and went for a hideout rig under his black coat. "Ya—"

Montana banged him one in the eye and tore his reaching hand down. Grappling, they wrestled around. All heads were turned that way with the saloon toughs, eager for a melee, cheering the pair on. And The Hombre went into action.

HE WAS at the lower open end of the bar. Unnoticed in the diversion, he glided behind it and was at the side of the first drink

wrangler. "Hey, you, customers stay outside er—" The latter began. His jaw kept wagging but no words issued as he became aware of the pressure of the gun muzzle in his side.

"Keep smiling—and move backward," ordered The Hombre. Out on the floor, Montana had just ripped a knife away from the hammer-headed one. Everything was going according to schedule. Kirby had warned Montana to pick a hairpin who appeared to be alone; thus far no friends had stepped in to side the accused one. A couple of house men moved in.

But Montana yanked a gun. "March outside, you lop-eared pack rat—and we'll smoke it out face to face!" he commanded. "An' that sick wife you deserted, she'll thank me fer salivating ya!" That turned all sympathy away from the hammer-headed gent.

"Just relax," The Hombre warned the barkeep as he backed against the rear counter where the till stood. The Hombre's other hand darted out and he scooped bills from the box, stuffing them in his pants pocket. He raked up another handful with plenty of gold-backed ones. "Yell, fella, and it'll echo in Hell!" He got another fistful, stuffed a few more inside his shirt.

Again he spoke softly to the broken-nosed bar boss who stood with a silly smile frozen under the sweat drops on his face. The Hombre backed toward the opening. And the bar boss was drawn along as if by an invisible cord, the gun now jabbing him in the leg behind his apron. They came to the trap door leading to the earth cellar beneath where the liquor supplies were kept. At a signal from The Hombre, the bar man lifted the trap. On shaking legs he went down the narrow railless stairs. Kirby, looking across the room dreamily, shoved a boot out from beneath the slicker he wore to make himself difficult to identify. It caught the descending man's shoulder and sent him pitching headlong into the darkness below. The Hombe let the trap door back into place.

Out on the dance floor, wrapped in the oversize black coat he had borrowed from the huge Darcy, Montana was playing out the end of his role. His keen eyes had caught Kirby's signal as the latter hopped onto a hogshead beyond the bar and lifted his sombrero quickly once. Montana released the terrified little gent.

"Aw right, gopher! I'll be waitin' out in the road! When ya come, fill your hand!" He backed toward the front doors, his Colts still covering the man. And then the unanticipated factor entered the game.

It was the big brunette who'd been dancing with the accused man. She had been standing off to one side. Suddenly she had plucked off her spangled dancing shoe. Leaping in, she brought the heel of it down on the side of Montana's head. Momentarily stunned, he reeled back on his heels, and his Colts went off accidentally. The bullet ricocheted off a post on the other side of the big hall, spraying splinters. One of them sliced open the flesh of a bare-shouldered dance-hall girl nearby. Blood spurted down her white-powdered flesh.

"He shot a girl! He wounded Sadie!" the cry went up. "The dirty lowdown—" A big bald-headed horse trader who'd been with Sadie dragged his hogleg, and the riot was on.

A HOUSE guard was swept aside as he himself tried to move on Montana to jump him. Tables went over with glassware flying everywhere. From the front of the place a man jumped to nail Montana from behind, but the latter, sensing the attack, wheeled at the last moment, and brought his big knuckles up under the jaw of the grappling man. He fell away. Several guns slashed out and a chair went sailing by Montana's head.

The bow-legged gent sent a bullet over the heads of a phalanx of men charging across the dance floor, then dropped to all fours and ducked under one of the bunch of tables hedging the front of the floor. Down at the back end of the bar, ignoring his own safety, The Hombre had started

forward. But he feared Montana was trapped.

The throng jammed back from the other side of the tables and two house guards waited with cocked guns for him to appear. But Montana had fooled them; with the place in confusion and feminine shrieks adding to the uproar, he'd gone around the corner of the floor beneath the tables. He might have made it safely to the rear and the side door. But a drunk slumped in a chair at the side of the floor over near the bar, roused by the shots, suddenly leaped up, pointing. The scuttling Montana had brushed his legs.

The latter was forced to break from cover. He came up with two guns now swinging. But the front bartender let fly with a bottle before he ducked. It shattered on a table beside the fugitive. And the spraying whisky hit him in the face, temporarily blinding him. A man leaped on his back.

The Hombre was trying to get through the stampeding mob and get down there. Then he saw Barbara Sebolt, still disguised as a man, appear out of nowhere. Her .32 chopped down on the head of the man grabbing Montana. With him freed, the pair broke rearward toward the side door. And Hombre Kirby speared through toward them with folks screaming as they fell back from him. Behind the pair, he sighted a house guard and the knifeman half-owner throwing down with carefully levelled guns. Hurried shooting was dangerous in that pack.

BEFORE they could fire, one of The Hombre's guns churned out a muzzle flash to usher lead on its way. The knifeman half-owner got it in the shooting arm. He was half spun around and banged against the guard who was unable to fire.

"Come on!" Kirby yelled at the pair, catching the girl's free hand. They rushed out the side door and rearward. Kirby and Montana had left their ponies in a little grove of trees well out behind *The Black Jack*. But even as they legged it toward them, gunfire broke from the back end of the dance hall. Inside it men had rushed to the rear door and windows. They were forced to veer into the yard of the place next door where some strewn packing cases gave them protection.

"You got your pony here?" Kirby asked the girl hopefully. He wanted to get her out of this jam. But she shook her bandana-wrapped head. She had walked into town. In slipping away from Jonathan Darcy's watchful eye, she had had time to get her pony saddled up.

They started to work their way out to the ponies again, The Hombre silently cursing the bright bluish starlight. Then Montana halted to spear an arm toward three hombres who'd come walking down a tree-flanked lane that ran back from a side street. Warned by the shots, the trio edged from the trees with hoglegs already jumped from holsters.

"Look out!" somebody bellowed behind The Hombre and his party. "The place has been held up. . . . Three gents—and they shot a gal! Look out!"

The fugitives had to retreat into the shadows of the building with the packing cases. Then they edged hurriedly in the dimness away from the dance hall. The night was wild cacophony of sound; they had stirred up a nest of sidewinders for fair.

"We aren't a-going to make it," The Hombre whispered in Montana's big ear. The latter nodded, then sprang to bend his gun barrel over the head of a man who hopped out of a whisky mill, Colts in hand. They went by his crumpled body. Pursuing footsteps from *The Black Jack* sounded behind, closing in.

Montana turned and pushed the girl and Kirby into a weed-grown alley beside a little house. "Try for the front road!" he husked. Out there, the last place they would be expected to go, possibly they could mix in with the mob and lose themselves. "I'll draw 'em on down this way!" He whipped a slug back at the handful moving down from *The Black Jack*.

HOMBRE Kirby didn't utter a single word of protest. He understood why Montana wanted it done that way, why it had to be that way. The girl was trying to say something but he shoved her on along beside the house. As he followed, the game Montana darted out into the star-glow where he could be seen and triggered once more. Then he ran on across backyards.

Kirby and the girl weren't halfway up toward the front street when the former saw there was no chance. The gun-slinger horde that infested Coyote Hill had organized quickly if raggedly. In the flickering glow of the coal-oil torches out there, two gunnies stood out in the alkali, Colts bared and ready. Another three-four hustled along the wooden sidewalk, barking orders. They were trying to pen in the fugitives. To go out there would mean certain capture. If The Hombre had been alone he might have gambled on smoking his way through. But now—

From somewhere, almost at his elbow, came a distinct snore. Then, in the gloom, The Hombre perceived the half-opened window of the house close by. In another moment, he had raised the sash and was swinging the girl through. He followed. Just as he cautiously closed the window, he heard a voice out back saying they thought they'd seen somebody turn in there.

Some kind of a small stand went over with a light clatter as the girl moved in the thick darkness. Taking her by the shoulders, The Hombre half lifted her through the doorway his keen eyes had discerned. And there was a grunt and some muttering from the gent sleeping on the cot in the room.

"Hey, who's there?" he called in a whisky-thickened voice, wheezing as he pushed himself up. "That you, Packy? Huh?"

The two stood tense and close in the little hall just outside the bedroom. "My hat—It's gone," the girl whispered close to Kirby's ear. "It-it's out in the alley."

"Who's there?" mumbled the man on the cot again, fuming as he scratched a match. It sputtered out in a draft and he swore. Boots sounded in the alley beside the house.

"Aw, tuh hell with it," snorted the orey-eyed gent, dropping back onto the cot.

BUT THEY could hear men stomping around out beyond the bedroom window, hear their voices and scattered handful of shots from down the line. If the girl's sombrero was found, they would search the house. There was even a step on the porch in front. The girl swayed against Kirby.

His arms flashed around her, straining her to him. From her, there was a little gasp. Then he put a hand under her chin and tilted the olive-skinned oval of face up to his own. His narrowed eyes flickered with a hot hard light, and their lips blended, held. Hers pressed back against his.

"You're terribly sweet, ma'm. And nervy as a danged idjiot," he whispered, an unexpected softness in his flat voice.

Her body was a-quiver. "How—wh-when did you learn I was a—a woman?"

He smiled in the dimness. "Almost right off, ma'm. That time when you captured me and took me to Jesu's place in that settlement. . . You tried to scratch the match on the table top when I gave you a quirly. . . a man'd used his boot sole or his trousers. . . And then—then you blushed so when I started to take off my clothes." He chuckled as he heard the man inside snoring again.

She pushed against his chest to get away. "You—you—Why, after that you called me names. . . And you—you kicked me in the—well, in the pants up in the room over that bar when you made me get out. You—You—"

"Sure," he whispered back, delighted by the whole thing. One of her curled hands struck at his jaw. Then it opened up and the gloved fingers ran softly over his face. The Hombre bent over her lips once again.

CHAPTER XV

TIME PASSED. For some time, they were oblivious to it. Then, finally, they realized the uproar in the street had died, and that there was no more gunfire. Reluctantly they stepped apart. And the same whispered word came to their separate lips simultaneously as they took cognizance of the every-day world again.

"Montana. . . ."

They tiptoed toward the front door, seeming to know what each had in mind without the necessity of the exchange of words. He put out his hand and stripped the bandana from her head. Her blue-black hair showered back over her shoulders. Then The Hombre slid out of his yellow slicker, balled it, and stuffed it in a corner. They stepped out onto the porch and eased into the folks moving along the sidewalk.

A man whistled. "Hey, looka the cow-girl in pants!"

Barbara flushed, but nobody recognized them as two of the trio who'd been involved in the hold-up of *The Black Jack*. When they came to a corner, they turned into the side street. A couple of minutes later they were moving down the lane toward the clumb of trees where Kirby's and Montana's ponies were waiting ground-anchored. They mounted and rode off unmolested. When they thumped across the bridge and reined down before Darcy's Shamrock Bar, they embraced again hurriedly, then hustled into the door of the kitchen at the side.

Montana was already there.

He was seated in a chair while Jonathan Darcy was busy wrapping a strip of torn cloth around a shallow wound on Montana's left forearm. The old-timer took one look at Barbara with her hair flowing over her shoulders, eyed The Hombre. At first, Montana scowled at the latter. Then he looked at Barbara's glowing face again, at the way her eyes dropped. And Montana gave The Hombre a knowing wink.

Afterward, they went up to the room they had hired. The Hombre started to take out the dinero he had relieved the till of. Pausing, he flashed a glance at the girl.

"Say, how'd you happen to stray in there tonight? How did you know we—"

"I heard you and Montana talking about it when I was out in the kitchen. . . . The walls must be thin here," she replied.

"Oh. . . ." The Hombre was still puzzled about it but he had started to count the dinero. "Two thousand a hundred and ten dollars," he announced finally. "Came pretty close, didn't I?"

Barbara stood frowning. "It—it's still stolen money."

"If you were starving, you wouldn't hesitate to kill a wolf that came along, would you? How do you figure *The Black Jack* gets their dinero? They'd steal a man blind any time they could."

She was still unconvinced. "I don't know. . . ."

HE DROPPED a hand on her shoulder. "Look! This is a rough tough game we're playing, and the gents we're bucking on this trail —they'd stop at nothing. Ruby Priest is a killer. So is George Cronkhite. You've got to understand that. . . ." He shook her a little. "You don't try to whip a locoed bull by singing lullabies to it, you know."

She nodded hesitantly and smiled wanly at him. He began to stack the money to wrap it up. "I'l go see Cronkhite. If you'll give me a copy of your copy of the map from the first grave. . . ."

Montana sat down and produced their copy and went to work at making a facsimile of that. When the job was done he wanted to go along with The Hombre.

"Don't you trust me?" the latter asked.

"Tain't a question of that, Kirby. Looks like we're in this together up to our necks now. But—well, I was thinking of your personal safety. You said that Cronkhite had a cou-

pla gun-slicks with him already and—"

"Don't sweat about me. I'll be back with the copies of pieces two and three. But, Montana, you got to think of Miss Barbara's safety. Somebody might trace the hold-up men of *The Black Jack* down here."

Montana saw the sense in that. When The Hombre rode off a few minutes later, he went alone.

Across the creek the town was still seething over the hold-up. Leading his mare, Kirby hung around a couple of groups at hitchrails and listened in on three gents discussing it on a corner. The way the facts had already become distorted made him laugh silently. Some gents were saying there were four or five hold-up men involved, two of them on guard at the side door. Montana was described as hunch-backed by one, as having a cast in his eye by another. A third man was pretty certain he recognized him as a gunman from the town of Gunsmoke up at the head of the trail. Somebody else declared The Hombre himself was a big six-footed bull-chested gent.

At the corner, the trio there were agreed on one thing. Billy Scott was a half-owner of *The Black Jack* and he'd bust a gut getting the hairpins who'd dared to jump the place. "And Scott himself sloped inta town just a coupla hours ago. I happen to know that," one of them told.

That last made Kirby's eyes narrow thoughtfully. Further up the slope he turned into a crooked side road where he'd been told Crowley's livery barn was. He weighed the angles of Scott's presence. Getting possession of copies of the second and third pieces of map was just a single move in the game. Actually they would be worthless till the Winrod grave had been located.

He came to the alley running down to the livery barn, passed it and left the mare tethered to a tree some twenty yards down. A little pulse was jumping spasmodically at one side of his jaw as he walked down the alley, hands on his gun butts. If the slick Cronkhite played this on the level it would be one of the most surprising things Kirby had ever known. He kicked the door once and sang out for Crowley. A muffled voice responded from inside.

Then a smaller door in the main one was swung open. Dim light from a lantern well back inside flowed out. Stepping over the high sill, he shot his eyes to the right to make certain no one there was waiting to get behind him. With his left hand, he pushed the little door back flat against the inside of the large one just in case one of those trigger-slammers was behind it. Then Cronkhite himself poked his head out around the edge of a stall facing toward the back of the table and beckoned.

"Over here, Kirby," he called. Arms folded on his chest well away from his hardware, he stood in sight as The Hombre walked over. Nodding, Cronkhite backed as if to step into the stall.

THE NEXT moment, a second man in the stall swept the cloth off a lantern he held. The sudden beam of light caught The Hombre full in the face, blinding him for the space of a few seconds. His lean hands jumped to his gun butts, but it was too late. Cronkhite's other gunman leaped in from the side and dented Kirby's ribs with his gun muzzle. Cronkhite himself swung at one of The Hombre's arms, knocking his half-drawn Colts to the barn floor. Cronkhite smiled like a weasel as The Hombre stood blinking and the lantern was lower.

"This time, I hold the ace, Hombre. Or do you reckon you'd like to try smoking your way outa this one?" He drew his own weapon and eared back the hammer. "Search him and git the dinero," he ordered his other man, the one with the goiter lump on his neck. "You sure are a chunkhead, Hombre, to come here like this!"

The Hombre shrugged as the gunman started to run over his body, feeling under his vest and shirt, then going for the pockets of his

narrow gray trousers. "You think I was big enough fool to carry the dinero on me, Cronk? You can peel my pelt off—and not find it."

"What?"

"Sure. I cached it outside afore I come in."

Cronkhite reddened and gnawed the end of his mustache, fuming as The Hombre chuckled. The gunman ordered Kirby to remove his boots but Cronkhite shook his head. He realized he had under-rated Kirby.

"Where is it?"

"Ungh-ungh! You and me'll go get it after I git the copies of the map pieces."

Cronkhite cursed and finally nodded. "Awright. I got the copies already made and—"

Again The Hombre shook his head. "Not trusting you, Cronk. Mebbe you made a mite of a mistake in copying 'em—on purpose. *I'll* make the copies from the originals."

Again Cronkhite reddened. "Awright, by gosh! And I'll make a copy from yours too."

"All I got is a copy. I told you that before, told you how Ruby Priest got the original piece from me. . . . Take it or leave it."

CRONKHITE was furious. He had been outsmarted at every turn, but he thought of that dinero. With the gun spread he could hire himself with it, he could dominate the play the rest of the way up the trail. Too, he'd have something if the fourth grave was never found and the whole thing went up in smoke. He gave in finally.

On an upturned box, with one of the gunhands holding the lantern, The Hombre carefully copied out on paper the tracings from the two white leather pieces Cronkhite had. Tongue protruding from a corner of his mouth, Cronkhite was doing the same from the copy of the first piece The Hombre had turned over to him. At length, both were finished. The Hombre alone seemed relaxed and at ease. Cronkhite and his hired gunmen were rigid, radiating an aura of suspicion and tension.

The knuckles of Cronkhite's hand around his gun butt were white. "All right. No tricks, Hombre. Now we go to that dinero."

"You and me alone, I said," Kirby told him. "Come on."

They left the barn, moving down the alley. At a sign from The Hombre, Cronkhite had reluctantly holstered his weapon. Both kept their hands carefully away from holsters. Halting, Kirby indicated the trailing gunmen with a nod and said they were too close. Tonguing his lips, Cronkhite finally gave them the order to stay where they were. He and Kirby walked through a patch of moonlight.

"If this is a trick—if you ain't got that dinero, I'm warning you," Cronkhite began. He stopped at the head of the alley. "Look, how far—how much farther? My gun-slicks are going to stay in sight of—"

"This is far enough," The Hombre said, smiling. He pulled off his sombrero, bending over till he had it upside down, "All right, Cronk. Help yourself." And he extended the hat, the inside of the crown of which was filled with the tightly rolled-up bills in paper.

"You had it on ya all the time, ya—" The astounded Cronkhite, as amazed at The Hombre's cool nerve as at the dinero, cursed softly. Then his eager hands shot out and began to dig avidly into the hat, tearing at the wrappings to get a look at the gold-back bills.

"Count 'em," said The Hombre. And when Cronkhite glanced up to nod he looked full into the Colts that had sprouted from Kirby's hand miraculously.

CRONKHITE was so excited sweat studded his face despite the coolness of the night. He kept licking his lips. At last he looked up to nod again. The two thousand was there.

"All right," said The Hombre. And he was gliding off into the shadow. "I can still see you, Cronk. And I've got you covered," he called warning. A few moments later he

was in the hull and spurring on up the crooked street to the edge of the sprawling town. He swung in a loop through the brush of the hillside down to the bridge. No sense in letting Cronkhite and his gunmen have a second crack at him.

When he got back to Darcy's barroom again, the girl was upstairs, having fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. He and Montana took their drinks over to a table at the side of the place. They were the only customers. The Hombre turned over the copies of map pieces two and three to Montana and they discussed the situation.

"I know you risked your hide in getting these, Hombre," Montana admitted. "But none of 'em are going to be worth a hoot in Hell less'n we locate that fourth grave. . . . How anything like a grave could plumb disappear—well, she beats me."

The Hombre nodded, eyes hooded yet cold and flickering with intense concentration. "We sure fine-combed that Boothill. Yet it must be there somewheres. Cronkhite didn't find the grave either. . . . And it's a sure-fire bet Ruby Priest didn't."

"Mebbe-so tomorra, if we could git talking to some of the old-timers. . ."

The Hombre shrugged, not thinking much of that idea. "Billy Scott the lobo is in town." It sounded apropos of nothing. Yet The Hombre was thinking how Scott had lived and operated along the Gunsmoke Trail for years. He would know a lot of its history.

"You mean you think he might draw chips, Hombre?"

"Could be." The Hombre smothered a yawn. After another quirly, the two went up to their own rooms. Darcy was already locking up the front door.

In the morning, as he started a fire in the sheet-iron stove out in the kitchen, Montana burst in, still tucking his shirt into his pants. "Hey, Darcy, you seen The Hombre?" When they went out to the horse shed, Kirby's black mare was missing. The Hombre had gone, slipped out in the night. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

BILLY SCOTT, the lobo boss, pushed back from the breakfast table in his suite in Coyote Hill's Palace House and puffed serenely on a stogie. He put one of his high-polished silver-inlaid boots on the rose-colored sofa opposite him, fingering his freshly-shaven face. He was a small dark-haired man, scarcely a hundred and thirty pounds, and a dude from his boot heels to the tip of his sombrero. His flowered vest would make a gambler green with envy, and the white shirt beneath his carefully-knotted simple black necktie was spotless.

"By Jove, that grub was all right," he called to the woman in the bedroom. Scott was an English remittance man, paid to stay out of the home country by his family. He spoke with a queer admixture of British and the cow country vernacular. The story was that his drinking had got him in trouble back home. He seldom touched the redeye these days. Sober he was a dangerous, cool-headed outlaw, fast as a striking sidewinder with a gun. But he usually outsmarted anybody who tried to buck him. When he got on the whisky, he was a besotted fool who didn't cease till he had drunk himself unconscious.

There was a knock on the door of the sitting room of the suite. Scott's little, almost feminine-featured face went blank. His right hand dropped on the outstretched leg. Though he hadn't yet donned his cartridge belt with its two big Colts with the silver stars inlaid in the butts, he was not unarmed. There was a derringer neatly hidden inside the top of his boot.

"Come in," he said in his thin nasal voice, his round gray eyes fastened on the door. When it opened, it was the gunman on guard out in the hotel corridor. He said Jack, another of the outfit, had news for the boss. Scott crooked a white finger for Jack to be sent in.

The latter's news was enough to bring the lolling Scott out of his

chair and standing wide-legged, twisting a napkin in his hands. Jack said a stud dealer had just come in from the Junction, a little cross-roads settlement a few miles outside of Coyote Hill.

"And he's telling it around that early this morning he saw Satin Chapman over at the Junction. . . Swears he ain't mistaken either. Says he saw him down on the Rio coupla years back."

Scott's lips curled back from his teeth as they gouged into his stogie. "Sure, Satin Chapman. . . Used to ride with that Hombre Kirby once. . . I know who Chapman is all right."

"The cardman swears it was him."

Scott frowned. "Chapman ain't been seen around in quite a spell, y' know. Some people've even claimed the bloody devil was dead."

"Well, the cardman swears up and down it was Satin. Said he had the fancy guns with the ivory butts and the silver inlay. Hair all slicked down with oil and fancy-smelling as usual. Says he had on a blue silk shirt and the big diamond ring just as usual. It was him."

Scott tapped the table nervously. "Mister Satin Chapman up on the Gunsmoke, eh. . . Most interesting, by Jove. Chapman went bad a few months before he disappeared. Hit the owl-hoot. All right. Tell the boys to keep a blooming eye out. When Chapman drifts in, I want to see him. . ."

THE *Black Jack* began to pulsate with it as the word swept through the place. It passed in an awed whisper from mouth to ear, from drink wrangler to a customer, to another customer, then to a dance-hall girl sitting with a monte dealer and a man wanted for rustling in the Panhandle. Satin Chapman was in the place.

Surreptitiously they pointed him out, the medium-sized slim man drinking alone at the bar. He stood as straight-backed and square-shouldered as a soldier, blue shirt gleaming, the white-handled guns stemming from his hips. Men eased over, ambling by for a closer look. He removed his sombrero once and there was the brown hair, sleeked down, perfectly parted, and without a strand out of place. When a man moved close to him he could sniff the odor of the hair oil Satin used.

"Sure is a slick-eared dude," a girl said after Satin let his blue eyes drift over her once.

"Don't let that fool you," advised the monte dealer. "Chapman is a walking hunk of Hell itself when he's crowded. Call him purty—but he's a real lobo when he goes on the warpath. I heard plenty about him and—"

Satin Chapman had stepped out from the bar as one of the girls, a tall willowy blond, came down the stairs from above. She paused, appraising him. Chapman smiled and the girl moved down toward him as if drawn by an invisible cord. He swept off his sombrero with a courteous gesture. They had a drink together. Then Satin pointed to the band lolling around on the little stage at the back end, drowsy in the mid-afternoon heat. He tossed a bill on the counter. In a minute a barkeep headed for the musicians with a tray of drinks.

When the music started, Satin led the hussy onto the floor with an almost old-world courtliness. They swung into a waltz. Soon everybody in the place was following them with their eyes. The gracefulness of the dude gunman's dancing was breathtaking as he pirouetted and handled his partner as if she were a fragile toy in his arms. Some folks even clapped when they ended the dance. Satin escorted her back to the bar.

"Don't they have any of that fancy champagne stuff here?" he was heard to ask in his low clear voice. "It's the least I can offer you after the pleasure of that dance, ma'm."

THE GIRL couldn't take her eyes off him, obviously entranced by the man whose manners were such a far cry from those of the average whisky-swilling patron. Satin was seen to raise a tumbler, half filled with straight whisky, and drain it without a blink. Then a couple of

gunnies came striding along by the tables. They nodded to Chapman.

"Run along, baby," one said to the blond. "We got important business. So trot—"

Satin Chapman's right hand flashed out, jabbing the hombre in the chest sharply with his finger. His other hand was already clamped over one of those white-stocked hoglegs.

"The lady will leave when she's ready," he snapped coldly. "Nobody gives orders to a female in my company, mister!"

The other of the pair smiled nervously, making no move toward the gun lashed to his thigh.

"No offense intended, Chapman. . . We figure you'll be right interested. Billy Scott'd like to see you."

One of Chapman's eyebrows lifted and he ran a hand over his glassy looking hair. "I see. . . Billy Scott, boss of the Gunsmoke Trail?" He shrugged, shoulders leaving the rigid cast for a moment. "Yes-s, perhaps I might be interested in hearing what Scott has to say for himself. . . You'll have to wait till I have another drink though." With a bow, he bid good-day to the blond and signed for a fresh double-slug of whisky.

He finished it unhurriedly, fired up a tailor-made cigaret, and only then went out with them. He walked lightly and there was a certain cat-like quality about the way he moved.

Up in his hotel suite, Scott had received word Chapman was coming. He came away from the door thoughtfully as he lit up a fresh stogie. Over by the windows, Ruby Priest with that gun guard of his, Chopper, were standing with their drinks. Chopper looked graver than ever.

"Was talking to a gent this morning," he said to his boss, "who met up with my brother, Red, when he rode through here. Red told him he was headed for Masalla, too. Danged peeculiar nobody back in Masalla 'membered Red."

Priest's little eyes flickered. Then he turned to Billy Scott. "Yep. It'd sure be worth a nice chunk of dinero for me to locate that Winrod's grave up there in Boothill." Like The Hombre, Priest too had figured Scott, who'd spent years on the Gunsmoke, might be able to find out about the missing grave.

Scott nodded. "Well, I could make some quiet inquiries. It seems a bit of trouble for such small stakes. But —well, we can take up the matter later. Satin Chapman is on his way up here now."

"What? Holy Hell!" Priest was so excited he sloshed half his drink onto the carpet.

The finicky Scott looked at the spot on the rug, scowling. "Blimey, what's the matter with you now?"

PRIEST fought for a grip on himself. "Well-l—uh—that Chapman and me—we—uh—well, we had a little run in about two years back."

Chopper nodded, rubbing his chin. "There was some lead swapping."

"All right. That's done with. There'll be no trouble now. My men'll be all around," Scott proclaimed. "Sabe? I want to find out why Chapman is over here on the Gunsmoke. And maybe we can use him, by Jove! He's one damned handy man to have siding you on a tough trail."

Priest wiped his forehead. "Mebbe, mebbe. . . But he used to be a friend of The Hombre's! And I told you Hombre Kirby is sitting in against me on this game."

"Forget that side of it," Scott assured him. "Chapman went bad just before he disappeared, and you know how The Hombre plays it. He won't be a saddle pard now of a gent who went outlaw. So—"

There were steps outside in the hall. Then the two men entered with the meticulously garbed Satin Chapman. The latter halted inside the door, one gloved hand massaging a gun butt as he calmly surveyed the occupants of the room. Chopper stared at him, squinting.

"Howdy, Mr Chapman," greeted Billy Scott walking over with outstretched hand. "I'm Scott. Right proud to make your acquaintance. . . Coupla my friends here." He introduced Priest and Con Chopper.

Chapman shook hands with Scott and gave a nod to the other two with-

out any sign of recognition. Scott was the personification of the genial host. He seemed to be genuinely flattered by having Satin Chapman as a guest, pouring him out a healthy drink and offering him a stogie. Chapman refused the latter as he seated himself astride a straight-backed chair. Even seated he held his shoulders in that square military carriage. He dumped off the drink as if it were well water, then interrupted the chattering Scott.

"Understood you wanted to see me, Scott. I don't imagine it was to discuss the weather," he said bluntly.

Scott dropped down on the corner of a table nearest his two gunhands standing against the door. "Not exactly, by Jove. You sort of dropped out of sight for a considerable spell there, Chapman."

The straight-backed man nodded. "Yep. Got badly shot up and had a fractured skull in the bargain. So I thought I'd give the overworked John Laws a rest," he ended with dry humor.

Priest flashed a look to Chopper. That last, the fractured skull, might explain why this Chapman hadn't recognized him when he heard his name. After a thing like that a man often failed to remember things.

Scott's little sly face split in a wide smile. "Well, you look fit enough now, egad. Look as if you could go down the trail with the toughest buckos."

"Reckon," said Satin Chapman succinctly.

"What brings you into these parts?" Scott asked as he refilled Chapman's glass. Scott fingered an empty glass, hesitated about pouring a drink for himself, then set the bottle down.

"Got word there were big doings on the Gunsmoke Trail," Satin Chapman said, staring off into space dreamily. "Heard certain parties were trying to follow the tracks of the old Fentriss expedition up to Gunsmoke itself." He paused to let quirly smoke curl up past his gleaming hair. "This fella, Priest, he's one of the parties. Gent called Cronkhite is sitting in on the game too, as I understand it. And there's a third party with a hairpin named Montana. Seems they're all tracing the old Fentriss party through a series of graves. And," he gave Scott a solemn wink, "I figured there might be some nice pickings for an ambitious jasper like me."

When he finished, Ruby Priest was rubbing his ruby rapidly and staring with jaw agape. Chopper still studied Chapman as if trying to place him, to recall something. Scott whistled softly.

"Blimey, Chapman, but your source of information must have been damned good."

Satin Chapman cocked an eyebrow, shifting slightly in the chair to inspect himself in a mirror on the other wall. "I've always had a heap of friends around the country. There was quite a lot of talk down in Rocky Forks."

"You didn't hear though that I might be declaring myself in," mentioned Billy Scott, smiling somewhat arrogantly.

"I'm guessing that now," said Chapman, unimpressed. "Seems to me like a bunch of folks are bucking each other. Mebbe—so it'll end up with nobody getting the cache at the end of the trail. I hear now nobody can locate that fourth grave."

SCOTT shrugged, walking up and down the rug with long swaggering strides that were half ludicrous in such a small man. "Did you ever consider that it might be extremely unwise, by Jove, to buck me if I sit in on the game?"

"Would it?" Satin Chapman asked with the hint of a sneer behind his cool voice.

Scott's face twitched, paling around his small mouth as he stubbed out his stogie on the table near where Satin sat. Ruby Priest's little eyes were snapping. Scott turned slowly on Chapman.

"Maybe we could get together. . . Maybe you'd like to work with my outfit. An hombre like you, Satin, I'd rate worth a big chunk of the stakes. And maybe I know some

things you don't know about the proposition."

Then Chapman knew, almost beyond a doubt, that Billy Scott had some information about the missing fourth grave of Gordon Winrod. Perhaps even knew how it could be located. "I'm listening," he said with that unbreakable calm.

Scott's smile seemed to widen. The next instant it was an evil grimace with his sharp teeth showing through it. And the double-barrelled derringer had dropped from his sleeve into his hand. And he had it covering Satin Chapman, scarcely three inches from his head.

"A bloody wise chappie, aren't you, Chapman?" Scott spat, reverting to the phraseology of his homeland. His eyes had gone glassy. There was even a hint of blood-thirsty insanity behind the now vicious mould of his little vulpine face. His pink lips glittered wetly. And when he continued his voice was shrill, the voice of a man twisted up to a murderous pitch.

CHAPTER XVII

"MAYBE you're here to double-cross me! Yes, by grab! Didn't think I knew Hombre Kirby was in on this game either, did you? Thought you'd be bloody smart—then sell me out, eh?"

Chapman studied the gun, then regarded the diamond ring on his left hand. "You act like a marijuannaed-up mozo running off at the mouth, Scott," he answered unhurriedly. "Do you think The Hombre would have anything to do with me now?"

Scott laughed shrilly. "Maybe I'm not taking that chance. Anyway, I don't have to. When I choose to locate that fourth grave, I've as good as got the famous Gunsmoke cache in my hands. And a snake like you occupying a six-foot claim on Boothill won't have any part of it! Sabe, Chapman?"

Satin Chapman's face remained an impassive mask. But his agile brain had spotted the clue in Scott's remarks. Scott didn't know there were five graves. And Chapman meant to be around if Scott was the gent who could dig up that mysteriously missing fourth grave.

"When you locate the fourth grave, you've got it?" Satin Chapman shook his sleek odoriferous head. "No, Scott, you see, there are *five* graves!"

Scott retreated a half pace, sucking in his breath noisily through his wet lips. He was astounded for a minute. Hesitant. Then he realized, from the flat way Chapman had made the statement, that it was so. Scott's eyes slid over to Ruby Priest. The look wasn't nice.

"*Five* graves, eh, Mr Priest. . . . And you told me only *four*."

Priest swallowed. "I only knew there were four myself. That was what that Sommers told me. I swear it, Billy. H-honest!" He fumbled inside his coat. "You can see my list of the graves. H-here! Only four on it. See?" For the first time he realized that Sommers had been as stupid as he thought.

Scott didn't even bother looking at the list Priest offered. Turning back to Chapman, he smiled as he lowered the vicious little derringer. "I was just testing you, Chapman. A bloke like me has got to be careful."

"Yes?" said Chapman drily.

"Sure," said Scott. "Just ragging you a mite. Of course, if you'd been planning to betray me, you'd have broken with that gun at your head. . . But now I know. Five graves, eh? You and I, together, Chapman, we're too damned smart for any of the rest of them. You know where the fifth one is?"

"I plan to find out, Scott."

"All right. All right. Excellent. And perhaps I'm the lad who can find out about the fourth one. Let's pool our stakes, Chapman."

Ruby Priest advanced a stride. "Say, I'm in on this! I have the map from the first grave. And—"

Scott gave him a cutting glance. "You'll take what we feel like offering, my lad. You'll take it and feel jolly grateful."

Rising, Satin Chapman flicked at some dust on his blue silk shirt. Nod-

ded with a smile at Scott. "Now you're talking sense, Scott."

Billy Scott reached out to take his hand. "We get the site of that fifth grave and we'll be ready to swing into action, Chapman. . . Meanwhile, Mr Priest and I will have a little heart-to-heart talk." His voice had a hiss in it when he turned to Priest. . .

IT WAS late that night when The Hombre reappeared at Darcy's place across the creek. He came slipping in the back way, whistling from the horse shed till big Darcy himself looked out and The Hombre learned the coast was clear. The girl and Montana were relieved to see him; but there was an undercurrent of suspicion behind their manner.

"Been around trying to dig up some information 'bout Winrod's grave," The Hombre explained enigmatically. "Certain jaspers in the country abouts I checked with." But he gave no details.

Darcy set up drinks for Montana and The Hombre and the three sat at one of the side tables. Once again there were no other customers in the place. Jonathan Darcy retired to the kitchen where he could be heard rattling pots and pans as he cleaned up.

"Coupla suspicious-looking gunnies dropped in here this afternoon," Montana mentioned. But he had seen them from the stairs and gotten out of sight. And the girl, disguised again, had remained on the floor above. "Darcy said they were right curious about who'd stopped in here of late."

The Hombre nodded, building a quirly, but remaining silent. Barbara could stand it no longer.

"Well, did you find out anything about Winrod's grave?"

The Hombre shrugged his stooped lean shoulders. "I figure I'm on the trail of something. . . . Later tonight or tomorra, I might know."

Barbara beat on the table top with her small fists, nerves a jangle under the suspense. "'Might', 'might' . . . . This is insane, utterly insane. We've risked everything. We've got the map pieces of the first three graves—but so has that Mr. Cronkhite! And now a grave simply disappears into thin air entirely. It's insane, insane." Her voice broke.

The Hombre put a hand on her arm to steady her. "Easy, girl, easy. We're even up with George Cronkhite, anyway."

"But that Ruby Priest, we don't know what he's doing! Perhaps he found the grave and somehow removed all trace of it and—"

Old Montana pointed a stern finger at the girl. "Now that'll be enough of that, filly! I told you I saw that Priest when I slipped over into town this afternoon. So if he's still here he hasn't found it either." Then he went on to quietly review the whole matter, talking so she would have a chance to get a grip on herself.

THE HOMBRE was just pulling the sack of Bull from the pocket of his hickory shirt again when a pot clattered loudly out in the kitchen. Darcy came hustling into the room.

"You folks are trying to find an old grave up in Boothill?" he said excitedly, wiping his wet hands on his flour-sack apron.

The Hombre levered himself out of his chair, eyes very bleak. Before he could speak, Darcy went on.

"One of the graves of the old Fentriss party that went up the Gunsmoke? That's it, isn't it?" He beamed around.

"How do you come to know so much about our business?" The Hombre snapped. There was a ragged dangerous edge to his voice.

"Heard you through the wall, mister."

The Hombre's left hand went out to feel of that wall. But he had already checked it before, it was thick and solid. He started to shake his head, one of his Colts half cleared from its scabbard. But Darcy did not show a flicker of fear, still beaming behind his spectacles. Then he leaned over the table and pushed sideward a small plaster plaque of a rearing horse on the wall. When it

was moved it revealed a small hole, piercing the wall right through, behind the plaque.

"Used to use it as a peep-hole when I could afford a barkeep," Darcy explained. "Just to make sure he wasn't pocketing all the dinero. See?"

The Hombre had to chuckle. "Sorry, Darcy. . . . You know something about the Winrod grave?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. But it must be an old grave. And it wouldn't, therefore, have to be in the Boothill just on the north side of the town there. Yee-up."

Barbara clutched his thick arm. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I've heard the old-timers talk. The original Coyote Hill settlement was further up the hill—not where it is now. And the cemetery then was out to the east where that second-growth timber is now."

"Wh-what?"

"Yee-up. Further up the hill, there's a track that cuts off to the left of the main road. That leads to the original Boothill."

They were so dumfounded they stood in silence for some moments. Darcy brought a bottle over from the bar. "If that solves your troubles, folks, it looks like we ought to have a libation to celebrate it."

After they downed it, The Hombre picked up his flat-crowned hat. Montana asked where he was going.

"You and Miss Barbara git up there and try to locate Winrod's grave," the Hombre said absently, obviously thinking of something else. "I've got other affairs to attend to."

Montana frowned. "I don't sabe, Hombre."

The Hombre looked over his shoulder as he turned to the rear preparatory to leaving. "Gotta to be right sure who else might be going up there to look for the Winrod grave . . . . I'll see you later. . . ."

CHAPTER XVIII

MENTALLY Montana Hannan cursed the faint creak of saddles and the jingle of bridle chains as they turned into the spur up the hill beyond the town. It broke off from the main road where some Spanish bayonet stalks grew beside a little seep spring. He looked over and saw the girl's slim figure rigid in the saddle and her .32 gleaming in her hand.

He leaned toward her, husky voice dropped to a guarded whisper. "Let me go in alone, Miss Barbara. You wait here. I can handle it and—" He flung up an arm to push away an overhanging bough.

The girl's proud chin tilted. "You'll have your hands filled working with the lantern. . . If anything happens, you'll need help. I'm going along!. . . I still can't understand Kirby going off like that. . . ."

The track made a sharp-angled bend under the trees. The next instant they were out in a bright patch of revealing moonlight. Montana grabbed the bridle of the girl's horse to get her in the shadow of a big pine. That moon was treacherous. One moment a silver scene would lay over the landscape, the next it would be dimmed out. Then, unexpectedly the luminous glow would be back in full strength.

Montana grunted and pointed ahead. Dimly the girl could make out a few lopsided crosses. In a small clearing in the timber, ragged with rank grass and brush, was the old original burial ground of Coyote Hill. They dismounted and Montana ground-anchored the horses in the cover of a thicket. After they stumbled over the first grave mound, he paused and hurriedly lighted the stable lantern, then grabbed up his Colts.

It was a ghostly chore as they probed along among the half-hidden mounds. At some the markers had long since been destroyed by the decay of time and weather. Other graves had sunk and were depressions in the thick grass. Stepping on one such, Barbara was thrown to her knees. She probed for support as she sought to rise. Her outstretched hand, pushing down grass, struck a boulder and she cried out to Montana softly.

HE SWUNG the golden cone of light from the lantern onto the moss-grown flat-topped rock. Faint and blurred a roughly-hewn inscription was revealed. "May They Rest," Barbara slowly deciphered part of it. Then they wasted no more time at that. It was the rock all right, and the nearest grave was a scarcely discernible mound just a couple of feet away. Gordon Winrod's grave.

There was a tough matted covering of sod. Using a piece of sharpended stick, Montana had to work till the sweat poured from him to break the age-hardened crust at the head of it. Then on his knees he gouged deeper and deeper at his gruesome task. Their hopes began to wane. It was possible in the years gone by that somebody else had removed the grave's secret. But finally his stick grated on something harder than the stony soil. And he was prying out a dirt-encrusted mildewed box.

The top of it had already rotted away, but there was a tin can inside it. And contained within that was a tarpaulin-wrapped package similar to the one they had removed from the first grave along the trail. Hands shaking, Montana worked it open and came to the oilskin cloth inside that and then, the map itself. Like the first, it was of leather with the tracings on it burnt in.

Barbara let out a little gasp, pushing her sombrero back on her bandana-encased head with relief. She took it from him carefully. Now they were one up on their competitors. Ultimate success was in sight. She wanted to dance with delight.

The next moment the wary Montana had doused the lantern. They needed its illumination no longer. Then the girl got an idea.

"Why not refill the hole and replace the sod, Montan. Try to make it look as if it had not been opened up. You said earlier it would be raining before dawn. Then if one of the other bunches learn of the location, they can't be sure we've already gotten this map segment," she whispered. She had to repeat her final words as the rising wind, blowing down the hill toward the town, snatched her lowered voice away.

About to lead the way back to their ponies, Montana hesitated. He smelled danger and he didn't like the feeling in the air up here on this deserted piece of the hill. Then, accustomed to obeying the girl's slightest desire ordinarily, he dropped back on his knees and went to work to comply. The wind flung dry leaves past their faces. Above them it rattled interlocking branches with a sound like the faint clicking of bones.

"We've almost won, Montan. Almost. . . ." the crouched girl breathed exultantly.

He worked faster with his big work-calloused hands. The old-timer was the type who feared the worst when things looked too good. Up in the sky a streamer of flaky cloud bank was whipped clear of the moon. The glow of the latter flooded down on the open space of the burial ground. And the silent light was like a kindof muted tocsin, a signal.

"All right. Elevate the dewclaws! And thanks for doing the dirty work for us, gents." And Billy Scott, two Colts barrels glinting under the moon, seemed to materialize like a spectre from behind a tree at the edge of the clearing.

Chortling triumphantly, Ruby Priest loomed over to one side of the outlaw boss. Then, in the grayish light under the tree limbs, other gunmen took shape. Moving in from the main trail afoot, they had happened upon the pair in the old Boothill almost before they knew it themselves. The gusty wind whipping down the slope had wiped out all sound of their approach.

THE CROUCHED Montana recovered from the shock in a couple of seconds, and he made his bid before he realized how many gents were around. Flinging himself on hands and knees in the cover of the grass, he flung a shot at Billy Scott. It missed by scarcely a hair's breadth, whining past the crown of Scott's Stetson to send him ducking,

But his hoglegs spat back in the next instant. And so did the guns of Priest and another man.

The girl had thrown herself behind the low chunk of rock. Then Montana was bawling out that he surrendered. Hands lifted, he raised up with a fresh bullet hole in the top of his hat. But it was not that that had made the tough old range-hand surrender. He was thinking of the girl under the gunfire.

"One more sneak play like that—and you gunnies'll find you've come here permanently," Scott said as he advanced past a couple of the drunkenly tilted crossed. The others came on too, hedging them from two sides. "Well, which one of you has the blooming piece of map?" Scott demanded.

Barbara had risen from behind the boulder, strutting forward gamely like a tough button in her jeans. Then her eyes jumped in their sockets, bulging with astonishment and, finally, cold fury.

"Chapman," Scott said to the man coming in from the right side of the clearing, "watch 'em! There ought to be a third one of them around, by Jove!"

And Barbara Sebolt was staring right at the man Scott addressed. Staring with bitter hate and scorn mirrored on her face for she recognized the man in the fancy silk shirt, despite his slicked-down hair and fancy white-handled Colts. Recognized him as The Hombre. Her voice was low and taut and yet knife-edged with the passion of the deceived as she lashed out at him.

"You foul thing! A skulking coyote wouldn't associate with you lest it become contaminated," she hurled savagely. "I've heard of low filthy things before. I've heard of killers and back-stabbers. But you—you—" Emotion choked her off a moment. "You prey on women! You seek to capture their affections to betray them!"

Ruby Priest guffawed. And Scott said, "I've heard the devil of a dude was hell on the skirts, y' know."

She went on, gloved fists beating against her legs in her impotent fury. "I'd give anything—even the thing we're after—if I had you lashed to a post and could flog you unconscious! Yes! Even the lowest animal will stand up and fight. But you—you," and her lips curled with biting scorn, "you creep and skulk and—I never knew anything as despicable and reprehensible ever walked on two legs! Never!"

THE HOMBRE, posing as Satin Chapman, stood square-shouldered and motionless, face frozen, taking it. Again Priest guffawed on the wind. Scott laughed shrilly.

"Why you're a blooming dog, old boy! I say! What's the matter, are you afraid of the skirt, fellow?" he jeered.

"Never laid eyes on her before," the bogus Satin said casually. "I—"

That was too much for the high-spirited arrogant girl. She reacted like a man. Her balled-up gloved right hand shot out. The Hombre's head was jerked back. And blood jetted from his cut lips. He made no sound.

That infuriated her even more. She burst out. "And now I'll tell Mr. Scott who was—" She was on the verge of saying, "—the man who robbed *The Black Jack.*" It never came out.

Montana had edged behind the girl to mask his movements as the eyes of all the rest followed the exchange between her and the jasper they took for Satin Chapman. The next moment, he swooped and seized something in the grass. Actually it was only the oilskin that had been wrapped around the fourth segment of map. Hugging it to him, he turned and darted for the other side of the clearing.

It was a surprise move, doubly so because it looked so plain foolhardy. Montana made a good five yards before even a cap was busted on him.

"The map—he's got it!" bawled Priest through the fire. And the night itself rocked with the roar of reports as more hoglegs sprang into action.

Montana seemed to bear a charmed life. And in the next instant, gray-blackness hung over the hill again as a cloud again blanketed the moon. Everybody was shouting as muzzle flame spiked the night. A man reeled howling as Montana's smoke-pole winked in response once from up in the trees.

The Hombre had sensed the wily old cowhand's game an instant after he made the break. Montana was trying to save the game in a last desperate effort. As things had stood, he and Barbara were captives. But if he managed his getaway and they were under the illusion he *did* have the fourth piece of precious map, they wouldn't look for it on the girl. And they might finally release her. It was a stratagem born of desperation.

The gunmen were tearing after him, fanning out as Scott shouted orders. And in the confusion in the dimness, Barbara dropped into the high grass of the old graveyard and started to crawl for the trees on the right. But a gunman had spotted her move and ran toward her with levelled weapon as he bawled out. Then he was rocking backward with a fatal hole in his chest as a slash of livid flame knifed from a clump of brush. The crouched Hombre darted sideward from that clump an instant after.

BUT THE SHOUT had done it. Ruby Priest's big voice came through the smash of reports, further up the hillside in Montana's wake now. Several gun-passers wheeled toward the side of the clearing the girl had dived from. But the disguised girl seemed like a cool deadly shot. From the trees over there, smoke-wagons poured a leaden hail. As the moon filtered free of the retreating lace of cloud, a wounded man somersaulted. Another pulled up, locked in his tracks, with blood from a cheek gash staining his face. He wasn't sure whether he was still alive or halfway to Hell.

The rush was broken, the gunslicks breaking to each side for protection of the timber. And over on the right side of the clearing, The Hombre wheeled away from behind a pine trunk and took off after the sound of the fleeing girl's boots.

In her panic, she stumbled and plunged into a moonlit opening in the trees. A man fanning off to the left from the graveyard spotted her and gave the alarm. And The Hombre veered from his path as he saw her swing in an arc from the opening when she rose. Barbara was trying to work her way around to where their ponies were hidden. Leaping a piece of outcropping rock, he almost overtook her.

The girl was like a cornered animal. Throwing herself behind a small tree, she raised the .32. "Stay away, Hombre, you double-crossing devil or—"

"Wait!" The Hombre husked as he lunged forward.

The gun exploded, almost in his face. He felt the tug at his sombrero as the slug nicked the brim. But he was on her, trying to grasp her. Swinging wildly with her gun barrel, she broke free as her shirt tore under his fingers. He grabbed at her from the rear as he stumbled off. Then he turned back to face the hunters, not seeking to overtake her again.

His gun snorted once and a few yards away a man sat down heavily in the undergrowth. Another charged out of the dimness. But Kirby's weapons made a *snicking* sound as empty shells came up in the chambers. He lowered himself on bent knees, waiting recklessly. The advancing gunhand's boots swished through the grass a yard from his right. The Hombre straightened, had a dim glimpse of Con Chopper's sad face. The Hombre chopped down with a hot gun barrel, felling Chopper before the latter even had time to see him.

Thumbing fresh cartridges into one of the still smoking hoglegs, The Hombre still waited to cover the girl's flight.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RAIN was a myriad thin gray needles hemstitching the rising dawn when Kirby rapped cautiously on the kitchen door of Darcy's establishment outside Coyote Hill. For some moments there was no answer. He whistled a few times, then called out. Somewhere in the building a door creaked on a hinge. Then the girl's muffled voice answered from the kitchen itself.

"The Hombre," he said in reply. "I'm glad you made it."

As she lighted a lamp inside, cracks of light showed at the shutters. Still the door didn't open. He shivered in his wet clothing, shooting repeated worried glances out to the rear as he waited.

"Hurry up," he called grimly. "I can take care of myself. But I don't want them to come along, tracking me here, with you here. Open up, dang it!"

Her voice came from the other side of the back door. "Come in with your hands on top of your hat," she ordered. When he grunted assent, the bar was slid back.

He had to push in the door himself. At first he couldn't see her. She was back of the lantern on the table, in a dim corner. The lamplight played off the blue-black barrel of her grimly pointed .32. The Hombre started to grin. Then he caught the heavy breathing behind him, jerked his head around enough to see Montana springing out of the dimness.

A heavy blow caught Hombre Kirby across the base of the brain. The floor swayed up at him and he was pitching into a bottomless pit of inky black. . . .

When he came to, he was propped in a kitchen chair. Water from a bucket that had been sloshed over him dripped from his ringing head to his old hickory shirt. The girl stood a few feet off, glaring coldly, the .32 still drawn. Bullet-headed Montana was across the scoured kitchen table, one of his hands over a Colts. The other was gripping The Hombre's shell belt with its two filled holsters. The Hombre tried to frame up a smile, then saw his boots some feet away. He wondered, brain functioning laboriously in the fog that still beclouded his brain, why they were there.

Montana gave him the answer, "You ain't got that fourth piece of map on you," he said heavily.

Probing at the back of his still numb neck, The Hombre shook his head. He opened his mouth but before he could answer the girl once again within a few hours was lashing at him.

"I'll admit you got nerve, Hombre. . . . You changed from that fancy silk shirt and hat—and even put away those white-stocked guns—and then thought you could come back and fool us once more, eh. . . . Do you think we are locoed fools? I recognized you up on the hill when you brought in your real friends after finding about the old cemetery. I—"

The Hombre spoke so wearily, with such an absence of emotion, she broke off. "Build me a quirly, will you, Montan? You got a punch like a burro's hind leg. I'm still shaky."

Montana's brow furrowed. But there was something about The Hombre, about the devilish coolness of him. Before he realized it, Montana hauled out a sack of makings.

THE EXCITED, embittered girl launched forth again. "I tell you, I recognized you up at the burial ground," she said, bending over him belligerently in her excited, "Why did you risk coming back here? What is your game now, Mr Coyote?"

He took the quirly and inhaled hungrily as Montana held a match. "What it always was—to get that cache—with you people."

"Ha-ha-ha!" She flung her hair angrily as she laughed. "To get it with who ever offers to pay you the most, probably! Unless you plan to double-cross them too and—" She broke off as The Hombre's head slumped on his chest.

Montana brought in a shot of red-

eye from the bar. The Hombre coughed on it, then opened his eyes and gave his lop-sided smile. "Look, ma'am," he tried to answer. "Frankly if you'd stop the chin-wagging just for one long moment, I could explain—"

"'Explain!' I don't doubt it," she mocked. "As I said to you before, Hombre, you can talk a bird off a bush. But now we know you've been double-crossing us all along! You've been—"

The faded blue eyes were suddenly bleak. Lurching half out of the chair, his hand shot out and seized her by her black hair. "You—*You* can say that after what happened when we held up *The Black Jack?* I mean, when we left the place. . . . *You can say that?*" Terrible deep-rooted passion was churning inside the man.

Montana's big hand pinioned The Hombre's wrist and made the latter release his grip. The girl was wan and breathing hard as Montana slammed the weak Hombre back into the chair. And it was Montana who took up the story that was a bill of accusation in itself.

"Listen, Hombre, we have the deadwood on you for fair. We learned things over in the town tonight. . . .

HE TOLD it. Going up the hill in the timber, he had cut over to the trail. Then he had gone back down it because he figured they would never expect him to move back in that direction. He had reached the ponies of the Scott outfit at the branching spur just as Barbara, remounted on her own pony, came bolting out. He had just grabbed a pony of the Scott bunch when a gunhand, coming down from the old Boothill, had seen them.

They had high-tailed it into an arroyo across the trail. Cutting below the town, they had come up along the bank of the creek to cross at the bridge. But a trio of Scott men had already rushed through the Hill and were on the other side.

"We was ringed in," Montana said grimly. The old-timer had figured their one chance was in laying low, that the lobos would figure them to try to leave the town. So they'd gone into a honky tonk down by the creek. And while they waited for the night to ebb to an end there, and the chance to slip across the creek, they'd overheard some men in an adjoining booth talking about The Hombre.

"You're no descendant of any man who was on the original party up the Gunsmoke," the girl jabbed in icily.

The Hombre nodded. "Correct, ma'am."

Montana leaned closer, studs of sweat on his upper lip gleaming. "You slew two men to get your copy of the layout of the graves. The McQuade brothers. Back at Rocky Forks."

"Correct again. That must've been George Cronkhite talking." He watched the ribbon of blue quirly smoke climb.

"A killer! A thief! A double-crosser and—and—" There was more pain than anger in the girl's eyes now. "Haven't you anything to say for yourself?"

The Hombre shrugged. "Not much . . . . 'Cept that Patch McQuade and his half brother were outlaws. I jumped them to get their copy of the graves map away from them—and also, after killing them, I didn't even bother taking that copy from them. That's where Cronkhite must have gotten it. . . . I made a mistake there."

THAT baffled them both. Barbara said, "Then if you didn't take their copy where did you get—"

"From Peter Winrod, last descendant of Gordon Winrod, the man in the fourth grave. Young Peter lives over Yucca Basin way now. He's a helpless cripple. I was there when One-Foot Hope reached him with his information from old Dal Fentriss."

They all galvanized as hoofbeats drummed heavily on the wet trail outside. Montana doused the lantern, and the rider passed on, thud-

ding over the ridge into Coyote Hill.

"Look. It's time we hit the trail. Git the ponies saddled up, Montana, and—"

"Not so fast, Mr Hombre," the girl warned. "Just how *do* you fit into this then?"

'Peter Winrod's brother, Abner, sided me in a tight down on the Rio once. He died of his wounds afterward. . . After that, the least I could do was to carry on for the young brother, Peter, when Hope came in with his story about the Gunsmoke. . . Could've told you that in the beginning. But—well, I wasn't too sure of you folks then either." He smiled wryly.

Montana cocked an eyebrow. "How do the McQuades—that you killed—come inta the picture?"

The Hombre finished the last of the whisky in the glass. "Explaining is dry work. That One-Foot Hope, he told how the McQuade's had captured him and tortured him and beat him and left him for dead to get his secret from him. . . He did die shortly after he stumbled into Peter Winrod's place." So Hombre Kirby had picked up the trail of the McQuade's to take their copy of the layout of the graves away from them. To stop them from using it, at least.

The girl nodded thoughtfully. "I remember now abut hearing of Peter Winrod some years ago. Yes-s. But—"

"But that ain't answering how you was with Billy Scott's bunch," Montana growled. "Did you hire out to 'em? Switch sides?"

"You think they'd trust me, The Hombre?"

"You were *with* them," Barbara insisted.

"Sure. But not as Hombre Kirby. Didn't you hear Scott call me 'Chapman'?"

It had been overlooked in the tension of the situation at the time. But Montana, knuckling his sparse-stubbled head, recalled it now. "You don't mean—he didn't mean Satin Chapman, did he? The fella who went outlaw an'—" His eyes bugged as The Hombre nodded. "You mean, you risked passin' yourself off as him?"

"Wasn't so difficult." The Hombre explained how. "You see, Satin was my cousin. We was saddle pards once before—before he turned." They were about of a size and resembled each other somewhat. Satin's hair was brown instead of yellow like Kirby's. And as the result of a hitch in the Army as a younker, he had a markedly military carriage.

"Passing as him was pretty easy. Remember, Scott had never met up with him, but folks knew about him and his dude ways. The hair oil makes my hair a shade or so darker. I got myself a fancy silk shirt. And the white-stocked guns with the silver inlay—well, I've always had them. You see, I was with Satin when he died of wounds after a deputy burned him down. Keeping my shoulders squared up all the time was the hardest part."

BARBARA caught her breath sharply. When she spoke there was a new softness in her voice. "But—b-but Hombre, if they'd recognized you!"

He shrugged. "Remember this. None of 'em, including Ruby Priest and his boys, had ever seen me except at night, never had a really good look at me. Scott himself had me sweating blood for a minute but. . . "

It was still in the kitchen save for the soft spatter of the rain on the shutters. Outside a night bird called in the growing dawn.

"You see," The Hombre added, "I went to see Scott because I had a hunch that, knowing this strip of country as he did, he might know where to find the grave. And I know I'm right."

Then Barbara remembered something.

She'd had the map in the pocket of her jeans when she fled the graveyard up on the hill. But when she got to Coyote Hill, it was missing. "You were the only one who overtook me, Hombre."

"Sure. I took it."

"And turned it over to Billy Scott, eh?" Her temper flared again. "Per-

haps all this you've told us is just more lies and—"

"Taking the map from Miss Barbara is proof enough—" Montana snorted, right hand lifting his Colts from the table.

'Proof that somebody used their brains up there," The Hombre cut him off with angry impatience. "I didn't know whether or not this little she-devil was going to get away then. Suppose they'd captured her and found the map. But if they captured her and *I*, unsuspected, taken for Satin Chapman, had it. . . Sabe?"

Montana's jaw sagged open with admiration. "By grab, Hombre, you're always one jump ahead of the best of 'em! By grab, you—"

"Let's make an end to this chin-music." The Hombre swung to his feet. "We can hit the trail with a mite of a head-start and—"

"How did you get away from them?" the girl asked.

"Slipped off when I sold Scott on the idee that maybe you hadn't had time to get the map outa Winrod's grave yet. He's gone back there to check on it." The Hombre smiled faintly. "I also prevailed upon him to take a coupla slugs of redeye for his—well, his nerves. He'll be riding that bottle hard for a spell once he's started. So we can hit out for Gunsmoke and learn about the last grave."

"But if we haven't the map from Winrod's—" she began.

The Hombre threw it over his shoulder as he ordered Montana to saddle up their ponies. "I've got it. It's out in my saddle roll." He went on into the barroom.

HE WAS putting some bills in a clean glass on the bar when the now penitent quieted-down Barbara followed him. "For our bill," he explained curtly. There was no sense in informing Darcy of their departure. "What he don't know can't be gun-whipped outa him."

She shuddered a little, still unaccustomed to The Hombre's hard-bitten acceptance of brutal possibilities. "I—I'm very sorry for the things I said and—and thought, Hombre. I—"

"Forget it. We're almost through to Gunsmoke now. And Billy Scott will be out of the game." He told how Ruby Priest hadn't known there were five graves, his layout giving him information on only four. "That means we should only have Cronkhite to contend with at the payoff."

She touched his arm in the dimness. "There wouldn't be any payoff for us—for Montana and me—if it hadn't been for you, Hombre. I know that now. You—"

"Forget it," he said again.

She blocked his way back to the kitchen. 'You've got to understand. When I heard them talking late tonight in that honky tonk—and the things they said about you. . . There was one man, a tall red-headed one—they called him Holy Jacks. And he said he always knew you were a killer and—"

"Holy Jacks—" The Hombre shut his teeth on an oath just in time. "Jacks, he's one of Scott's boys. Scott had a spy planted with Cronkhite, that means. And it means he'll find out where the fifth grave is, by grab! Billy Scott is still in the game, then." He tapped rapidly and nervously on the bar.

"I want you to forgive me, Hombre, and—"

He brushed by her without even a glance, the blue eyes bleaker than frozen water glazed by a winter moon. She called his name. He only gestured impatiently. "Get ready to hit that saddle. . . This trail is going to be hotter than Hades' own main street. . . ' '

CHAPTER XX

FROM Coyote Hill the track climbed steadily toward the town of Gunsmoke up at the head of the trail. It began to wind through rough broken country, angling around scrub-thatched sharp hills and pushing through narrow sparse-grassed valleys. It was desolate country with few signs of human habitation up there near the head of the Gunsmoke. Above, the cloudless leaden-hued sky seemed to reflect the dead blankness. The sun was only occasionally evident as a

dull red globe sulking behind the overcast. But the heat was like an invisible stifling blanket crowding down on the earth. Heat devils oscillated from the alkali strip of the trail before their eyes constantly.

Earlier they had picked up some grub at a hoeman's shack. They stopped briefly for a few hurried mouthfuls washed down with brackish creek water, then moved on at a steady hand lope. Once, when the girl moved a little ahead, stocky Montana swung his horse close to The Hombre's.

"Then the way it sizes up, it don't look as if that George Cronkhite will be in on final play, eh?" he queried.

"I figure he will," The Hombre said without emotion. "He has the layout of *all* the graves. . . with the directions about reaching the fifth one. He'll hear about the shooting up at the old Boothill and figure what's happened. Then he'll be hitting on."

Montana gnawed his lip worriedly, eyeing the girl's back. At length, he nodded. "Yes, whoever gets the last piece of map from this fifth grave, Porter's, he holds the top card. He can make anybody deal with him. Umm."

An hour later they paused to water their animals at a *tinaja* in a brush-choked gulch. All three of them were powdered with trail dust so their eyes peered from a dun-colored mask. The odor of the sweating ponies hung over them like an aura. And tension interlaced with the suspense of the last play for the jackpot pulsed between them like a tangible current.

They had just moved on, rounding a bending in the gulch, when The Hombre saw the mare's ears prick up. His hand was sawing back on a gun butt in the next instant as he whistled once sharply to halt the others. Then they heard the crashing in the brush and the panting of a man up on the left.

"All right," shouted The Hombre. "Come on the hell outa there or get a window in your skull, hairpin!"

From up on the gulch sound a heavy voice answered irritably. "And what in all-fired tarnation do you think I'm trying to do, by grab!" And then the matted scrub foliage parted up on the gulch side where a small cut entered there. The figure of Jonathan Darcy, topped by his red beaming face, broke into view.

The Hombre broke into a dry chuckle, partly of relief and partly at the picture the bar boss of The Shamrock made. Astride a bony paint, a big anthill of a conchaed Mex sombrero topped his huge frame. A flaming red shirt garbed his thick torso. And the .45's thonged down on his thighs seemed like pea-shooters against the background of his massive body.

"Howdy, folks! Don't look so scared. Yee-up, it's me, Darcy. I—whups!" He almost plunged from the kak as the paint slid and stumbled down to the gulch bottom. "Hot, ain't it?" And unconcernedly he removed his spectacles and proceeded to wipe his sweat-clouded lens.

"What're you doing here? How did you get—" The Hombre began.

DARCY fished a bottle of redeye from a saddle bag and proffered it. "Figured you gentlemen might need some tonsil irrigation 'bout this time. . . Got here by a short-cut, Hombre."

"Why? What's the idee?"

"Throwing in with you folks—less'n you got some objections. I did borrow a saddle once and it happened to have a horse under it. But I went straight since then. . . And I figured you could use an extra gun." He took back the bottle from the grinning Montana and tilted it. "Just to make sure it—"

"Ain't poison. Yes, I know," The Hombre said impatiently. "Joining up with us. But do you know—"

"Where you're headed? And what you're after? And the fact that Billy Scott's sitting in. Plus a gent called Cronkhite. Yee-up. I know them things."

"Say, how in blazes do you know?" The Hombre scowled.

"'Member that hole in the side wall I showed you? Well, I had another bored in the floor of my room over the bar so I could keep an eye on those thieving bartenders from

there too. So-o, Hombre, I just *couldn't* help hearing things."

The Hombre cocked an eyebrow, then pulled the grin from his face. He smelled a snake in the grass. "Figure to be counted in for a cut at the payoff, Darcy?"

The smiling eyes behind the spectacles hardened. Darcy's mouth became a flat dangerous seam in his big face. "Hombre, I never heard of you hiring out your hoglegs for dinero. Well—me, neither! If I'd wanted to play it that way, I could've held you up for a price before I told you where Winrod's grave might be found." Angrily he wheeled his pony down-trail back toward Coyote Hill. "Reckon the road'll be too crowded going the other direction anyways."

THEN The Hombre was spurring up beside him, putting a hand on one of those thick shoulders. "You got my apologies, Darcy. I was wrong as hell! If you wanta punch me in the teeth, go ahead."

Darcy's big face beamed. "What? And get a window in my skull sixty seconds later!"

The little party, four now, headed on for Gunsmoke. Darcy had brought some fresh beef with him. "Almost starved to death as a child," he explained it. "Never forgot it, so I always take precautions."

Montana looked up from the tiny fire in a side draw where he was broiling the steaks as they halted at sunset. "That so? Starved to death? How?"

"Was lost in the woods for a whole half day," the big man chuckled.

They moved on again after eating at The Hombre's insistence. Montana wasn't so certain it was necessary. Scott might still be trying to track them down around Coyote Hill. And maybe Cronkhite hadn't caught up with events yet. But the experienced Kirby knew that breed, knew how hard and ruthlessly a Billy Scott or a Cronkhite would drive when they smelled gold at the end of the trail.

A little after midnight they did bed down with The Hombre himself taking the first guard shift down at the edge of the trail. He and Jonathan Darcy had a quirly together under the moon before the big man turned in.

"How about that barroom of yours, Darcy?"

"Business was gitting danged bad anyway. Billy Scott had passed the word around to boycott me 'cause I'd refused to pay him protection dinero . . .So, I reckon I'm not losing much."

The Hombre nodded. "I sabe. Gives you a little reason for craving to settle the score with him, too. Uh-huh. . . Still, if Scott shouldn't return from this little pasear to Gunsmoke—well, you'd have been all right."

Darcy looked slightly sheepish in the moonlight. "Well, they was other determining influences too," he admitted. "And both of 'em wore skirts. Yee-up. Two gals back in the Hill had their foolish little hearts set on hogtying me and slapping on the marriage brand. Things was gitting right warm."

The Hombre chuckled, then sobered. "Say, you wouldn't happen to be any relation to that former marshal of Tombstone, Smoky Frank Darcy."

"Sorta." Darcy stuck out a big paw. "Shake with Smoky Frank's pride and joy—I mean, his son. Yee-up."

"Now I *am* glad you're with us. Any boy of Smoky Frank's will be a real asset on this showdown. . . Better grab yourself some shuteye."

LONG before dawn, the hard-driving Hombre Kirby had them in the saddle again. When the sun came up, it was hotter than ever. And a sultry wind like the back-draft of a stove, whisking clouds of alkali at them spasmodically, added to their discomfort. The Hombre kept an eye on Barbara Sebolt, but she bore up remarkably well. A little before midday they drew up at the base of the little mesa on which Gunsmoke squatted, swinging off the trail into a stand of scrawny cottonwoods. All of them realized the showdown was imminent. All hoped, though none dared put it into words, that they might get to the fifth grave, Silas Porter's, and get possession of the all-important fifth segment of the

map without opposition. Find it there, and get away with it.

The Hombre sleeved sweat film from his forehead. "Well, it isn't a case of going to the grave here."

The girl nodded. On the layout of the graves up the Gunsmoke Trail, instructions for locating the fifth one simply said to present the layout to Joel Parsons, postmaster at Gunsmoke. He had been a friend of Dal Fentriss, sole survivor of the original party.

"But, we may not be the first ones to git here," The Hombre went on thoughtfully. "And if we ain't, guns may be waiting for us up in the town. . . . That's the way I'd play it if I got here first and had a gun spread behind me. . . ."

Montana shifted his eyes from Barbara to Kirby. "You mean we shouldn't put all our eggs in one basket? All right. I git your point."

It was decided The Hombre and Darcy would ride into the postoffice while Montana and the girl waited outside the town. The first two left the cottonwoods and pushed up the slope to the top of the tableland. They rounded a low knoll and were smack abreast a hovel at the edge of the straggling trail settlement.

* * *

Gunsmoke was like a sun-bleached skeleton not picked quite clean. It was a dying drab little collection of human habitations and paint-peeling stores like packing crates slapped down here and there. On the left side of the single street was a boarded-up meeting house with one corner caved in. Across from it, two abandoned houses leaned drunkenly in on either side of a long unused store. The store's front doors were missing and its windows smashed in. The pair moved on, alert eyes constantly swivelling, hands never far from gun butts. A dog dozing beside a waterless, rotted watering trough lifted a drowsy head, scratched a flea bite, then settled back to somnolence.

"Gunsmoke?" jeered Darcy. "Who'd ever waste a single cartridge on this graveyard?"

A MAN STARED at them over the sagging batwings of a ramshackle barroom, yawning. Two others, whittling on the steps of a little General Store, nodded without interest. Then The Hombre nodded toward a one-storied place of business set back a little on the other side of a cabin. A weather-beaten sign tacked to the tree in front of it read, "Parsons and Son, Undertakers. . . U. S. Postoffice." The wary Hombre spoke under his breath and they forked past it, dismounting beneath a big eucalyptus tree a little beyond.

Nothing happened to break the cemetery-like atmosphere of the expiring trail town. They eased back and turned into the combined undertaking parlor and postoffice. A musty decaying odor hit them in the face when The Hombre pushed open the door with his boot. Nobody seemed inside. Down at one end of the front of the place, on the other side of a partition that ran back from a railing to split the rear half, was a grilled window with "Mail" lettered over it. There was no sign of life.

"Maybe we're in the dead letter department," said Darcy.

There was a rustling of some papers, the creak of a swivel chair. And a prematurely bald gent of about thirty slid a guarded sly-eyed face into sight on the other side of the grille. "Yes?" he said thinly.

"Joel Parsons?" said The Hombre. He had his copy of the layout of the five graves in his hand.

"My pop," said the man behind the mail window. "Dead."

The Hombre had been fearing something like that. After all, it had been years ago that Dal Fentriss had led his party up this way.

"But I know all about his affairs. If they was something you wanted, perhaps—" The younger Parsons let it hang there, his eyes on the paper Hombre Kirby held.

"Well, I don't know. . . . Here's a paper here your dad'd have savvied." He unfolded the sheet that was a map of the Gunsmoke Trail with the locations of the graves and instructions for finding them.

There was a slight cracking sound. Jonathan Darcy had been leaning on the little shelf with pen and ink beside the window. He caught the opened ink pot just before it slid off. Parsons frowned at him, then spoke to The Hombre after a quick glance at the paper he held.

"Information 'bout that oughta be worth something to you, mister. Shouldn't it?" He winked knowingly.

Kirby hesitated. There'd be trouble enough at the finish without any gunplay now. "Well, how much would you want?"

"More 'n you got! Grab a hunk of the ceiling, ya darn gophers!" And a lank man edged around the corner of the central partition from the rear, a couple of hoglegs sprouting from his hands. The Hombre recognized him as Wex Clay, the layman who'd gone crooked; he had seen him in *The Black Jack.* A second man, pushing Colts before him, appeared behind him.

"You boys are goin' to find yourselves a grave all right," Clay promised.

CHAPTER XXI

DARCY was the nearer to them. Blinking deceptively behind his spectacles, looking slightly stupid, he said to Clay, "Hey. your face is dirty, pard."

Clay stared. "Git your dewclaws up, ya big—"

And the ink pot Darcy had saved from falling before shot from his right hand that still held it. It nailed Clay full in the teeth. The ink itself was harmless, but the shock of it did the trick. Darcy leaped on the momentarily sightless Clay and grabbed his gun barrels and shoved them upward. Desperate, Wex Clay pulled both triggers.

With one, he sent a bullet biting into the ceiling. The other trigger dispatched a slug up through the under side of Clay's own jaw. It blew off the top of his head.

Whipping around Darcy, The Hombre swung his Colts on the second gun-slick. The latter had been knocked backward when Clay had stumbled back onto him. And the fool tried to get a gun muzzle levelled on the deadly Hombre Kirby. One of the latter's smokepoles crackled out, flame-shot smoke erupting from the muzzle. The second man was lifted a few inches from the floor. He bounced once as he fell across Wex Clay's sprawled boots.

Surprisingly light on his feet despite his hulk, Darcy flung back to the mail window. Inside it, Parsons was pawing at an open safe for the gu he kept there. Darcy said an ugly word and gripped the metal bars of the grille. There was a rending crash of wood, bending bars. The whole grille came out. And Darcy shot his other arm through and clutched Parsons by the back of the neck. Gun falling from his shaking hand, Parsons squawked like a terrified chicken.

"Wasn't you just dying to tell us something?" Darcy said without heat, beaming away, as he dragged him back to the other side of the window.

THERE was no more trouble. "It —it's up in Leadville, the oth-other grave, Silas Porter's," piped the postmaster, mentioning the old ghost town where the lead strike had run out. "He's buried under the floor of the old-d p-postoffice there."

Darcy now held the poor devil by his string of necktie and was riding it up tighter and tighter against his windpipe.

"Where's Leadville from here?" demanded The Hombre.

"Up the—the canyon down from the east end of the mesa. . . 'Bout five m-miles up."

"Let's make tracks," snapped Kirby. Halfway to the door, Jonathan Darcy turned to wave an admonishing finger at the half-choked post-

master. "Come outa this door inside o' one hour and I'll really git rough!"

Folks were staring from doorways and windows, but they drew back at sight of the pair. There was no attempt to interfere with them as they hit the saddle and high-tailed it out. They rejoined the girl and Montana down in the cottonwoods.

"Either Scott or Cronkhite's already been in—and gotten the information," The Hombre said as he told them what had occurred. "They've headed up for Leadville already. So we—"

Already in the kak, the girl sent her pony out of the cottonwood clump. "What're we waiting for?"

They swung around the base of the little mesa to the east and picked up the ragged trail there. A half mile on, as they topped a high sand dune, they saw the entrance of the steep-walled narrow canyon on the other side of a basin. The Hombre swung into the lead when they entered it and followed its curving course as it bent to the northeast.

No more words were needed. They knew what they were heading into as their ponies stretched belly along the sandy bottom. The heat between the pocketing high walls was intense. Vegetation faded as they worked deeper into the cut till there was hardly a wisp of bunch-grass big enough to shade a gila monster. The bottom became rougher, rising and falling in sharp dips. Once they passed a pile of yellowed bones that had been the skeleton of a horse. Great boulders flanking the track appeared more and more frequently. They were huge things, roughly rounded by the action of water in some long-lost geological age.

SOON THEY were forced to ride in a single-file column, the boulders having become so thick they filled the bottom almost from side wall to side wall. It was plain that the operators of the old lead mines had been forced to pry them aside to form the narrow alley to get in and out of the canyon with their wagons. The rocks grew so large they dwarfed a horse and rider, casting huge gouts of shadow across the yellow sand. The canyon began to angle sharply like a broken-backed snake.

In the van, The Hombre was almost at the crest of one of the sand humps. Then he jumped a Colts from a gun scabbard and twisted his horse sharply to throw himself into the cover of one of the massive stones. He waved the others to rein up hurriedly. Dropping from the hull, he worked up to the crest of the hump, on hands and knees when he got there. Following suit, the other three joined him. Montana's in-sucked breath whistled sharply between his teeth.

Ahead lay the ghost town of Leadville, abandoned years back when the lead deposits ran out. A couple of hundred yards on, the canyon broached out, splaying into a huge bowl beyond. On the other side of the bowl a gigantic hill rose against the horizon. Here and there on its brush-dotted side could be seen the fallen-in shaft entrances of the old workings. And all about the bowl were strewn countless numbers of the mammoth boulders.

But it was the cluster of grey-hued rotting buildings of the ghost town that locked their attention. Midway along what had once been its street a bunch of men moved at work. The Hombre's eagle-sharp eyes were the first to identify one of them.

"That's Billy Scott there. . . See him in the creamy-colored skypiece. See, he's pointing!"

It was a surprise to find it was Scott. Evidently he had side-tracked The Hombre's idea of going back to inspect the grave at the old Boothill on Coyote Hill. Holy Jacks had learned from Cronkhite about the fifth grave. And when Scott got the word, he had struck right out. At the postoffice, the hint of force and a fat chunk of dinero had done the trick with the greedy sly-eyed Parsons.

"They're working on a building," muttered Darcy. "Seems like the place has fallen in and they're try-

ing to git an opening in the debris."

"Uh-huh. That's it. That'll be the postoffice."

"There's that big Ruby Priest," said the girl.

"And they's a good seven-eight of them," Montana added. "No, I see another. Nine, anyways. What—"

BUT THE HOMBRE was already speaking with action. Crawling back from the crest, he turned and headed back for the cover of the hemming boulders. "You look the other way," he said curtly to Barbara as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"What's your idee?" Montana asked.

The Hombre was unwrapping his saddle roll, the steely tendons in his lean but wiry torso playing under his tanned hide. He lifted out the blue silk shirt he had used in his impersonation of Satin Chapman. Then the ivory-stocked inlaid Colts that had been the late Satin's. From the money belt laced inside the waistband of his tight gray pants, he produced the diamond ring.

"Going in there," he said tersely. "As one of the boys—Satin Chapman, of course." He began to don the silk shirt.

"Holy Pete, Hombre—" Darcy gasped. "Why—say, if they smell a polecat in the woodpile, your name'll—"

"Look right pretty on a grave cross," The Hombre said with dry humor. "And, Jonathan, you're just the gent who can stage a real wake for me, I bet!" He had strapped on the white-handled guns, the diamond ring glinting on his finger. Then he produced a bottle of hair oil from his saddle bag and proceeded to douse his head liberally with it. "By grab, this stuff sure stinks." He winked at the girl who, face blanched, stood staring at him.

"You can't do this!" she burst out in a taut small voice.

"What do you wanta do—rush that pack of trigger slammers head on?"

"So you're a-going to try it single-handed?" Montana tried to make his voice ironic, but it was too deeply tinged with awe and respect for the cold nerve of this bleak-eyed man. "Look. Scott's bad enough. But they's Ruby Priest, that snake. And that Chopper gent with him. If they once git wise that you—"

The Hombre smoothed back his hair and clapped on the pinch-topped sombrero he used in the Satin Chapman role. "I'm going in. . . Wait for a chance to jump 'em. I'll try to git hold of that fifth piece of map. Now. . . you git these horses back outa sight deeper 'mongst the rocks just in case."

"Awright," said Montana obediently. He realized that it would be useless to try to halt this coldly headstrong, ruthless man who had such confidence in his own ability to face down any situation.

"Then," The Hombre continued, voice as casual as ever, "you and Jonathan work in amongst the buildings from the back. Git yourselves set in a house or store. Then wait. And—" He thumbed over at the girl. "—keep her outa it. We don't want her messing up the plans again."

"Awright," agreed Montana and Darcy in unison.

"Wait. Mebbeso I can grab off Scott or Priest as a hostage. Git set where you can see the play. And—and don't slam a trigger till you see me shooting out in the open. And if either of you hellions know anything about praying, it might be a good idee. . . ."

BARBARA flung past Montana and grasped The Hombre's shoulders. His face worked, then was blank save for a curled lip. "Maybe you think I'm a-going to sell out again, ma'm."

Her eyes flashed with fury. He pushed her away, took Montana's outstretched hand, nodded to Darcy. The latter gave him a slap on the stooped shoulders that made The Hombre jerk.

"I'll be saving a drink for you, Hombre. Yee-up. So you gotta come back for it!"

A smile flickered on Hombre Kir-

by's face though it failed to touch the now bleak eyes. Then sand jetted up behind a heel as he turned sharply and vanished among the awesome boulders that dwarfed them. The last they saw of him then was the back of his now squared shoulders as he moved like a marching man.

It was some minutes later when the watching Montana saw The Hombre reappear, stepping into the ghost town's main street from beside one of the old cabins. Montana beckoned Darcy and they themselves worked in closer on the cluster of buildings.

"If that walking devil don't come outa this alive," the old cowhand muttered, "he's going to have a heap uh company to stay here with him permanent. . . ." They edged up on the rear of the first building on the street.

CHAPTER XXII

STRIDING along as nonchalantly as a jasper about to join a group of friends on a hometown street, the imperturbable Hombre moved up on the group intent on getting into the caved-in postoffice. His sombrero swung in one hand as he sleeved his forehead, the gleaming oil-darkened hair revealed. Then one of the workers sighted him and shouted. Half a dozen, including Scott, whirled. Their hardware leaped up to cover him.

"Howdy, Scott," said the man posing as Satin Chapman. "The postoffice man told me you'd be here."

One of Scott's eyebrows climbed in puzzlement. "How in the blooming hell did you get here, mister?"

"Walked," said The Hombre calmly as he kept on coming, making no attempt to drag a gun. "Horse went lame 'bout two miles down the canyon."

Ruby Priest, with the dour Chopper just behind his shoulder, stepped up beside little Scott. Priest glowered suspiciously. "Where in blazes you been, Mr. Smarty Chapman?"

The Hombre stopped a few feet away. "Since when've you been top bull in this neck of the woods, tinhorn? I thought I knew the boss man here. Scott, you don't seem too danged happy to lay eyes on me."

Scott smiled a little at the subtle flattery. "What happened to you, Chapman? Where did you go off to?"

"That night you pulled outa the Hill, I heard a gent on the street drop a remark, Scott. It gave me an idee. I paid a little visit to that bar across the creek."

"That danged ornery Darcy's place!"

"Yes. The girl and her party—they were there."

"What happened?" Scott's eyes jumped with eagerness.

"A heap of gunpowder got burnt up. . . . Would you like to know you mightn't be bothered by that Hombre jasper again?"

"What?"

"You got ears, Scott. If he can travel far with the lead I put in him, the devil'll feel himself cheated."

PRIEST FORGOT his rancor now too. "The girl? Did she have those other pieces of the map?"

"Mebbe the skirt-chasing Mr. Chapman didn't want to touch her roughlike," suggested Chopper with a sneer.

The Hombre flicked him with his eyes. "Two-Bit, don't git jealous 'cause you couldn't git an eighty-year Injun squaw to look at you twice on a dim day with that thing you wear for a face."

"Well, the girl, did she have—" Scott cried out.

"'*Did have*', that's correct, boss," The Hombre said. "By the way, how long do I have to look into these damn gun muzzles?"

Scott's pink tongue ran furiously around his equally pink lips. He gave a sign and the hoglegs around were sheathed. "You got the rest of the maps from her? You got 'em here and—"

"Not here, Scotty. . . . I never play dumb with smart jaspers like you." He smiled benignly into Scott's highly-flushed face. It was plain the lobo

boss was well loaded with redeye. "You and me are businessmen, Scotty. I cached the other pieces of the map back down the trail a ways."

"Yes-s?"

"When you git out this final piece, then we'll squat and have a little parley. . . I'm like you, Scotty. I only play with blue chips and for a big chunk of the pot." The Hombre slowly shined up the stone of his ring on the front of the blue silk shirt. It was a thin high bluff he was working.

Scott belched, and grinned, revealing the sharp teeth. But with the whisky singing in his brain, he was not his normal sharp self. He nodded once, then whirled and cursed the men who'd stopped working. "Git the hell in there, you bloody swine! What the blooming hell do you think we're here for?"

They turned back to the toil of clearing away the fallen lumber of the broken-in roof of the old ghost town postoffice. Priest moved in closer to peer in. The Hombre nudged Scott.

"You and me hold the high cards, Scotty. . . . No sense in our declaring too many hombres in on the cut at the payoff, is there?"

SCOTT SLID his eyes around and winked. The next moment there were yells from two men. Everything seemed to happen at once.

One of them was Holy Jacks who'd just shoved aside a beam and gotten into the back of the little building. He was pointing at a spot on the floor. When the roof had crashed down, it had busted open some of the floor planks. And through the aperture could be seen the shape of a tarpaulin-wrapped corpse. They had found the fifth grave.

The other man who had yelled was pointing back down the canyon. The Hombre's heart skipped a beat as if he wondered if some of his own party had been spotted. But the man had his arm slanted up at the sky. And over the top of the clifflike sides of the twisting canyon they all could see the pall of yellow slow-drifting dust that meant a party of horsemen coming up the canyon.

"Cronkhite!" Scott spat out. He began to bite out orders with one eye on the dust pall, measuring its distance away. And then Holy Jacks came hopping from the wreckage of the old building, bearing a rusted can. He pulled away from the avariciously grasping Priest and shoved the can at his boss.

The next instant, Scott had torn it open and snatched out the oilskin-wrapped fifth segment of the prized map. He shoved it inside his shirt, snapping out orders again. "Git them horses outa sight back in the bowl. . . Then git in the buildings along the road here—on both sides. We'll cook a damned pretty trap for that Cronkhite bounder! Shake your hocks, darn your eyes! By Jove I'm not going to lose out on the last hand!"

The men worked fast. The ponies were trotted from sight. With Scott himself standing in the middle of the dust track and gesturing where he wanted his men to go, they began to dive into the old broken-down buildings of the ghost town. Watching for a few seconds, The Hombre picked out a little hovel where nobody else had gone and disappeared inside. But he promptly slipped out a side window, ran down behind a few more cabins, and picked one away from the center of the ghost town, closest to any entering riders.

He was barely in it, peering out a window shadowed by the sagging roof of a little porch, when he saw the Cronkhite bunch appear over the sand hump down the canyon. Little Cronkhite with his sagging mustache was at the head, and he had a full dozen men behind him. Cronkhite's shout floated down on the stillness of the ghost town, and the pack eagerly put the gut-hooks to their ponies to come in at a gallop in a cloud of spraying sand.

A BOOT scraped on the edge of the porch outside. The Hombre galvanized. He had already dropped on his knees at a side window up in the front of the room. It commanded the incoming trail. And he had un-

thinkingly swept off the pinch-topped sombrero and raked his hair loose in preparation for the coming ruckus. He was The Hombre again, the role of Satin Chapman instinctively cast aside in this moment. And as he turned at the sound, Con Chopper slid into the room.

"It's Ruby an' me, Chapman—" Chopper started as Priest loomed behind him. Then his tongue seemed turned to stone inside his sagging jaw. He made a gagging sound. He took in the mussed hair, and he saw the naturally stooped shoulders of Hombre Kirby—not the militarily-squared shoulders of Satin Chapman. And Chopper knew.

"The—H-Hombre. . . . " It issued in a dry whisper from him. And he did nothing. Whether it was surprise or fear engendered by what would happen to him if he broke his promise to this walking gun-devil he himself knew not. He simply stood rooted, not even lifting his drawn guns.

And The Hombre was on him. Kirby's gun swept in a short decisive arc, and Chopper's cadaverous body folded up inside the front room. The Hombre leaped to the doorway. But Priest had wheeled in his tracks and dashed over to the next cabin and into its doorway.

"Scott! Scott!" he cried across to the one-time General Store where the outlaw boss was waiting in ambush. "The Hombre's here! Satin Chapman is—"

Big Priest didn't realize The Hombre could see him even though he was in another building. That The Hombre could, from the porch, see in a side window of the other place. One of The Hombre's guns stung the silence with an explosion. Priest swayed and began to double with a slug in the back of his shoulder. But the bullet had arrived a second too late.

"Chap-man — is — The Hombre, Scott!" Priest managed to finish before he sank.

The Hombre whirled and rushed back inside the place and to the side window that commanded the trail. The shot had brought Cronkhite and his bunch up short down the street where a burnt-out house stood. And The Hombre followed out his original scheme. Steadying a short-gun over the window sill, he took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. The man beside Cronkhite screamed as the impact of the bullet knocked him half out of the saddle. Then grabbed at his slug-broken arm.

CRONKHITE hesitated but a long second. After all, he had four pieces of the precious map, and he had a gun spread at his back. He let out a yell to his men, waving his Colts, and they were bolting into the heart of the ghost town, triggers cocked as they came. The Hombre chuckled quietly. It was as he wanted it. Cronkhite was not riding into any dry-gulching trap. The Hombre had set his rivals against each other.

Lead raked from the windows and doorways of the buildings of the ghost town. A rider toppled from his horse, rolling under the hoofs of another as he writhed in the dust. But a Scott gunhand, firing from behind the half-leaf doors of an old honky tonk, pitched out through them, half his face shot away. Some of the Cronkhite men lit running, seeking brief cover as they threw down at the powder flashes licking at them.

In another few moments, the ghost town was a bedlam, crisscrossed with savage gunfire, men boiling around as they cursed through the thunderous bursts of reports. Calmly The Hombre fired, trying for little Cronkhite once but missing him. He sent a running Cronkhite gun-slick somersaulting in his tracks. Then he shifted to a front window and sent two slugs burning into the front of the General Store down the way. One of Scott's men fell through a remaining pane of glass in the front window. Then The Hombre's own left hogleg flew from his hand as his upper arm went numb. A bullet had plowed through the flesh of it.

He wheeled in time to see the red-headed Holy Jacks stepping from a back room of the little cabin. Scott, warned by Priest, had dispatched a man to take care of The Hombre.

The latter slammed the trigger of his right-hand Colts, and Holy Jacks' shot came simultaneously. The Hombre felt as if he had been clubbed just above the left ear. As his eyes glazed, he saw Holy Jacks going down with the crimson spouting from a hole in his cheek.

Hombre Kirby's senses started to spin; his limbs seemed turned to water. He was creased, nicked on the side of the head, but the blow had stunned his brain. And he glimpsed the shoulder of a second Scott man behind Holy Jacks' folding body in the doorway to the back room.

There was no alternative but to drag his tail out of there pronto. With the tide of black unconsciousness lapping at his mind, he was incapable of defending himself. Somehow he reeled out the doorway and tried to make it into the alley running back from the road. A Cronkhite rider swung over to throw down on him as he wobbled helplessly. And then, through a fog, he saw Cronkhite himself, afoot, closing in. The Hombre tried to fumble up his smoking gun.

Then, like something in a dream, the rider was wheeling away, rocking in the kak with a slug under his ribs. And the charging Cronkhite himself seemed to freeze in mid-stride, his deceptively soft face tilting back and upward as if he had heard a call from above. Very slowly his knees unhinged and he went face down in the road, a hole in his hat just above the band where a bullet had hit his brain dead center.

"HOMBRE! Hombre!" And through the swirling hoof-churned dust, coming from down the road, appeared Montana dwarfed by the massive red-shirted Jonathan Darcy. Darcy wrapped a big arm around The Hombre and supported him as if he were a child.

"Steady, Hombre! Steady, mister!" He got him against the side wall and hooked a bottle of redeye from a pants pocket.

The first swig cleared The Hombre's head in a couple of seconds. Strength flowed back into his wire-tough frame. He grabbed up one of the hoglegs Darcy had dropped in getting out the bottle and swung forward.

But the battle was about done. Three Cronkhite riders were already flogging their ponies out across the boulder-strewn bowl toward the big hill and escape. A wounded man crouched at the edge of a strip of wooden sidewalk, one hand feebly hoisted in token of surrender. Gunfire spattered from the General Store, and a Cronkhite gun-passer sagged back into an alley down the line, clawing at his belly.

"Two of 'em in the store," The Hombre bit off. "Let's—" Bullets from the guns of the two in the store chopped into the wall around them, wiping out the rest of his words.

They weren't needed. Fanning out, the trio crossed the road, firing as they went. A third gun lashed at them from a house two places down from the store. Montana veered off to take care of that sniper. The Hombre saw the latter come pitching out onto the front steps of the house before he himself darted down along the side wall of the store. Roaring like a drinken Comanche brave, Darcy was busting for the front door of the store.

The Hombre got at a side window and straightened, ignoring the pain of his wounded arm. It was just in time to face one of the pair inside who smelled his game, but The Hombre's gun was faster. The man's face was powder-smirched from the explosion of Kirby's gun as the former went down. The Hombre tried to draw himself up over the window sill with one arm.

He saw Darcy bust in the front doorway. The second man rose from behind the counter to throw down at him. Darcy triggered twice and missed.

"Hell with this!" the huge barkeep bellowed. He flung his smoking weapon at the Scott killer and then vaulted the counter. Both men vanished from sight behind it. There was a thumping, and then Darcy's hulk rose as he bent over something. The head of the something, the gunman, rose into view, lifted by Darcy's

hands around its neck. There was a snapping sound like a wind-pipe cracking. And Darcy released the body and wiped his hands together.

"Sometimes I git excited," he said as he revaulted the counter and came to help The Hombre scramble over the window sill.

Both of them stood blinking as if shocked. It was the fact that there was no more gunfire. Together they went to the front door. Two Scott men were just dragging themselves into their saddles in amongst the big rocks of the floor of the bowl. Both of them were too burly to be Scott himself.

"Where *is* Scott?" The Hombre cried as he dashed back into the store.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GUN-BATTLE had sobered Billy Scott, brought his scheming brain back into full control. And when he had seen The Hombre's two pards rush to save him when it seemed he might be chopped down, Scott knew the game was up even if the Cronkhite outfit was routed. And Scott remembered what he had come for, the fifth and all-important segment of the map; he had it inside his shirt. No sense in hanging around to stop more lead. He already had a shallow cut in his right shoulder. He backed from the two men in there firing with him. In another few seconds he left the rear of the store and started down the canyon, working behind the buildings.

Somehow, later when he had time to figure things out, he would obtain possession of those other four pieces. He hurried along, never thinking of the fact he had no pony. He just wanted to get the hell out of that devil's jackpot. The man who lived collected the payoff as he had always told himself.

He realized the fire had slackened off. Then the canyon seemed to ring with silence as the echo of the last gun report waned away. Pausing to mop sweat from his little face, Scott happened to glance between a pair of shacks out at the road. And he saw the girl who had been up at the burial ground that night. She was standing out there, gun in her hand, as she peered up the street.

Then and there Billy Scott knew how he was going to get the other four pieces. And in a matter of moments.

HE CREPT through the dim alley, then stepped out into the dimness, rising in the canyon now that its sides cut off the westering sun. The next instant he had his gun nose denting the girl's back. He spoke. And then they were trudging through the dust back into the ghost town.

Scott heard them shouting in the General Store as they sought him, he realized. Then he made out that Montana fellow seated on its front steps, pulling his pants up over a wounded leg.

"Shoot—if you'd like," Scott sang out mockingly.

Montana dragged himself up by a post of the porch, tanned leathery face going ashen at the picture. The Hombre appeared in the doorway, crouched. Then his cocked gun sagged helplessly as he saw Barbara.

"I hold the last ace," Scott shrilled gloatingly. And just to make it complete one of his gun-pack, a tubby gent with half of one ear missing, appeared from behind a set of steps past the store. Recognizing his boss, he hustled down to join him.

Scott prodded the girl up the steps, the tubby man at his side now with drawn gun too. "Inside!" Scott ordered. There might be some wounded gent snooping around still.

The Hombre backed in, helping the limping Montana. Out of a back-room in the store stepped Darcy. In the dimness, he didn't know the girl was present. He saw his pards with raised arms and flung up his gun. One-Ear shot straighter. There was a dull moan from Darcy and he came lunging forward in drunken strides with crimson pouring down over the side of his head. He collapsed, shaking the whole

ramshackle building, a couple of feet from Scott and One-Ear.

"Now gents—including Mr. Satin Chapman," and Scott giggled at his own joke, "we'll have the other four pieces of the map!". . . .

BACK IN the cabin where The Hombre had made his stand, Chopper found himself on his feet, leaning against the wall as he held his gun-cracked head. After a while he realized there was no more shooting. Blindly, like a dumb animal, he stumbled out into the graying light of the road, not knowing what he was going to do. The groans from the next-door cabin halted him.

Lurching in he made out his boss, Ruby Priest, lying on the floor. "Gimme a drink—for the love—a drink," Priest mumbled as he saw the other's figure. Priest worked himself up on the elbow of his unwounded side. He tried to concentrate with his pain-wracked mind. There was something familiar about the sad-faced angular figure over him. Priest didn't know where he was, had forgotten what had happened. In going down he had smashed his skull against a sheet-iron stove in the corner. Then he thought he remembered.

"Red," he husked. "Red, you're a good fella. I never meant to harm you. Gimme a drink—"

Chopper thumped down on his knees beside him. "Red? Red? My brother. . . But you said you never knew him—or—or s-saw him. . . Now —I sabe—you lied. So—s-so, you must uh killed him. . . killed Red. . ."

Priest's mind cleared slightly. Then terror tore at him with the cold tentacles of death. "Chopper—Chop—look, I—I couldn't help it. Orders—orders, they c-come down from B-Billy Scott himself and I—I—"

"Billy Scott," muttered Chopper. He pushed Priest's pleading hand away. And before the latter could speak again, Chopper had his Bowie knife out and it rose and fell five times in the dimness.

When Chopper floundered out into the road again, the faint light of a guttering lamp showed through the doorway of the General Store. Chopper crept closer, body convulsing with silent sobs, slow tears tracking the powder grime of his face. He saw Scott's narrow-shouldered back inside. And he dragged his form silently up the steps.

"No sense delaying matters, by Jove," the triumphant Scott was proclaiming inside. "I get the maps or —by Jove, gentlemen, use your imagination!"

Montana, seated on a box, growled, "And when we turn 'em over, if we do, what guarantee have we got of our safety?" He wasn't thinking of himself. It was the girl, Barbara.

"Guarantee?" sneered Scott, flushed with success. He chuckled. "I can kill the lady any moment. So-o. . ."

CON CHOPPER almost made it, almost got the man who had ordered the death of his brother, Red. Somewhere he had lost his guns, but he was creeping in with the knife. And he realized that Hombre alone had noticed him and would keep silent for his own gain. Then a loose plank groaned as Chopper swung up his knife arm.

Like a cat swapping ends, Scott was around. His gun exploded twice and the bullets broke Chopper's body in half smack in the middle. And the one-eared gunman jumped forward to cover The Hombre and Montana. But down on the floor, a massive arm swept scythe-fashion. The arm belonged to Jonathan Darcy who'd been merely creased across the skull. He had been conscious a full minute.

That powerful arm struck two pairs of legs. It whacked the boots of the one-eared gunman clean from under him, pitching him onto his ear. And the arm flashed on to curl about the legs of Barbara Sebolt to yank her forward and down flat beside him. "Hombre!" croaked Darcy.

The Hombre was already diving for his white-stocked gun he had dropped on the floor. He got it and sent a slug into the chest of One-Ear

as the latter came to his knees. A second report blended with The Hombre's. It was from the flame-stabbing gun of Scott as he whirled back.

But Hombre Kirby was already rolling across the dusty planks. Scott fired again, slamming wood from the counter just over The Hombre's head. And The Hombre, flat on his belly, shoved out his gun and fired.

Scott went a step backward, then stood swaying. He lifted his gun a few inches, then it slipped from his fingers. His hand pawed at the frame of the doorway and he slid down along the frame with a red mark like a blooming bud on his shirt front.

IN THE WAN light of the lantern, they put together the four pieces of the grave maps on the store counter, then carefully flattened out the fifth piece removed from Scott's body. The sure fingers of The Hombre fitted the segments of the leather together surely. But it was the quick-witted girl who got the significance of the assembled piece of burnt-marked leather first.

"It—it's just a map of the—of this canyon here," she said weakly. "Look, there's the 'L' for Leadville. And there's the bowl at the foot of the hill out there. And—" She swayed.

Darcy ducked his bandage-ringed head and came off the floor with the oilskin wrapping that had been around the fifth piece. "Hey, look. There's another piece uh leather here, a thinner piece." He passed it to The Hombre.

At first it seemed like a blank white strip. There were no burnt markings on it. The lantern guttered. And then The Hombre was leaning close over the leather strip. "Writing on it. . . faded but. . ." he breathed. He squinted. A chuckle came from him.

"'To whatever heir of us should ever find this fifth piece of the map,'" he began to read, "'the Lord be with you. I, Dalton Fentriss, in a sound state of mind, am writing this. You have an unbelievable fortune in your hands. The Leadville mines are worked out. . .'" The Hombre paused as he strove to decipher the faded writing. They all held their breaths.

"'—worked out,'" he took it up again. "Yeah. 'But the huge boulders strewn up the canyon and in the bowl represent a fortune few men ever dreamt of. Those boulders are loaded with fused silver. To get out the silver, it will be necessary to use the floatage method. The rocks must be crashed and then the sediment floated on water to separate the silver from the stone. . . All claims in Leadville have long since lapsed. It is only necessary to get to the nearest Federal land office and stake claims on the whole place. By arrangement made before my departure on this trail, presentation of this map at the Bonneville Cattlemen's Bank will give access to a safe deposit vault containing the report of an Eastern geologist on this canyon. His report estimates the value of the silver here at better than half a million dollars. . . The Lord be with you. . . D. Fentriss. . ."

THERE was a tense hush as he finished. It was hard to realize. Then a plunk broke the spell as Jonathan Darcy put a bottle on the store counter. "Reckon this calls for a drink, folks."

And they began to jabber at once. Suddenly they broke off again. Barbara was looking into The Hombre's eyes. "Neither Peter Winrod nor I would have any of this if it hadn't been for you, Hombre," she said huskily. "I—I—" She sobbed a little through a smile.

Darcy tapped Montana's shoulder and thumbed toward the moonlight. He gave him a hand to hop along on his bandaged leg. They went out into the road and moved along it, lighting up quirlies.

"The Hombre should certainly git a share," Montana said.

Darcy looked over his shoulder, then wheeled Montana around to see

(Continued On Page 112)

GUN TRAIL TO ADVENTURE

By Ralph Berard

Jay Gordon just couldn't seem to fit in anywhere.

AN INCESSANT pounding of nails tormented the hot, oppressive air which lay heavily along Ridgetown's dusty main street.

Young Jay Gordon leaned against the door jamb at the front entrance to his Golden Hour Saloon, his long slender fingers leisurely rolling a cigar between his pursed lips. He looked older and more business-like than his twenty-five years demanded but there was a hint of kiddish amusement about his eyes. The threat Garley Olsum had made to build the new saloon across the street and drive him out of business seemed a bit ludicrous.

Jay was about to turn back inside when Olsum suddenly appeared around a pile of new lumber and moved directly toward him. The new competitor was tall and slender. Olsum wasn't such a bad-looking hombre but he possessed a cruel eye and his features seemed unnaturally set and determined. A business-like sixgun hung at his right hip in a tied-down holster. Somehow, Jay had a feeling the gun was there to make an impression more than because Olsum was likely to use it.

Coming close, Olsum said abruptly, "You decided t' accept my thousand dollar offer for your dump?"

Jay rolled the cigar out of the corner of his mouth and smiled indulgently. "Think I'd rather sell to Harry Gowan for less money," he drawled provokingly, "I like Gowan."

Olsum scowled. His lips parted angrily as if to speak again but he seemed to think better of it. "Name yer own poison," he grumbled, then moved on, his fingers lingering suggestively near the bone handle of his sixgun.

Jay's eyes followed the tall newcomer down the boardwalk as Jay rolled the cigar back between his lips. An almost uncontrollable desire to draw his own gun and drive a lead into the boardwalk close to Olsum's feet took possession of him but he grinned the impulse away. Gradually his features sobered. Nobody understood him, he guessed. Jay just wasn't made like most other people were. Certainly Olsum would never be able to understand him.

Jay'd been here in Ridgetown three months. He'd bought the Golden Hour with a thousand dollars he'd won in two lucky poker games out yonder behind the towering Tetons to Westward. It was what he called a last desperate effort to settle down. But it was no go; he didn't like the saloon business; he didn't like staying in one place. He kept looking wistfully at the distant peaks, watching the afternoon sun turning red and making black silhouettes of them. He sighed a little almost inaudible sigh as he turned. When he looked along the sidewalk again, a girl was coming toward him.

ALICE BROKERLEY looked unusually young and slim and beautiful this evening but the usual smile was missing from her pretty face. "Hello, Jay," she said, only glancing at him, then looking intently at the new carpenter work across the street. "Looks like competition."

"Uh-huh." Jay shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I don't care. Harry Gowan wants to buy me out anyway."

Alice's frown deepened. She looked at him questioningly, somewhat disappointedly, Jay thought. He looked away from her, hiding his feelings in an indifferent attitude.

He had already admitted to himself that he loved Alice; that was one more reason he was selling out. He could never tell her about his love because she wouldn't understand either. People who loved each other were supposed to get married and married people settled down and stayed in one little town and worked and raised. . . No one ever understood a man who wasn't like that, who had itchy feet and a star-eyed brain and had to keep moving.

"Are you going to run out of town because you've got competition?" The girl was asking the question pointedly, facing him squarely and looking at him with eyes he wasn't able to meet.

"Uh-uh," he said almost bashfully, "I was goin' anyway."

"Are you a coward, Jay Gordon?"

He faced her now, removed the cigar from his lips and tossed it aside. He didn't like cigars. He was smoking one to-day. . . well, just because there was no excitement, nothing to do. Alice's blunt, challenging question caused him to think back briefly over some pretty hair-raising adventures of his brief life. He smiled at her and saw a flash of something in her face that made him hope suddenly that maybe after all, she would be able to understand. "No, I don't think I'm a coward," he said.

"I do," she challenged back with cutting emphasis. That brief flash of understanding was gone and before he could answer further, he was watching her little pointed shoulders set themselves squarely as she moved rapidly away. She was like all the other people, he was forced to decide. And yet, who was she, and where had she come from? It was whispered in town that her name wasn't really Brokerley at all, that the Brokerleys had taken her in when she'd come to teach school a year or two back and folks had got to calling her the Brokerley Girl. Jay had always thought there was something different about her. But now he swung back inside the saloon more downcast in spirit than he'd felt for a long time. Alice was like all the rest. Because he wouldn't stick around and engage in a cheap small town squabble over money with a tall, lanky bully like Garley Olsum, she had decided he was a coward.

The sooner he left Ridgetown the better. He'd never known any real mother or father and no home except the wide range of the cattle-strewn prairies and the vast craggy expanses of the gold pocketed mountains. Certainly somewhere out there beyond the sun-blazing Tetons was some new adventure that would make him forget this snippy little Alice Brokerley person.

THINGS MOVED better than Jay had dared hope. Just after nine o'clock next morning Harry Gowan came into the saloon. Gowan was a capable chap of enormously strong muscles and upright, easy-swinging carriage. His gun hung on him in a good sturdy way and Jay figured that if Olsum ever should bring the competitive situation to a point of violence, no man in Ridgetown would be better able to protect an investment in the Golden Hour than Harry.

There was nobody about this early. When Jay saw Gowan swing through the batwings, he put on a cheery grin he was far from feeling. "Come t' buy me out, Harry?" he greeted amiably.

"I offered ya eight hundred last week," Harry said flatly.

"I wasn't selling then," Jay said.

Harry Gowan leaned up to the bar and pointed a long finger toward his favorite brand of whiskey. "Wee one," he ordered as if to hide the surprise Jay's remark created. "You sellin' t'day?"

"Five hundred," Jay grinned.

Gowan swallowed his drink at a gulp, choked on it. He eyed Jay suspiciously. "You loco? I offered eight."

"Ain't worth it," Jay said. "I got competition now."

Harry Gowan's big hand slapped his gun belt confidently. "The competition you got don't cut down my offer none." He stood still a moment, his hand to his ear, listening. The sound of hammering reached

them plainly. "Too noisy to be taken serious," Gowan added.

"Five hundred," Jay repeated.

Gowan looked at Jay suspiciously, then pointed his long finger at the whiskey again. "Never take more'n one at a time," he remarked, "but there's somethin' queer about you, fella."

"Money ain't everything," Jay quoted rhetorically. "I don't want you payin' more'n the place is worth."

"I'll pay you six," Gowan compromised.

A sudden thought came to Jay. He glanced at the clock. Nine fifteen. "Five is my price," he snapped, "and make it fast. Maybe I can still get the nine thirty stage out of this town. How soon can you raise the money?"

Gowan realized finally that Jay was serious. He scampered out remarking he thought Jake Sleeter was already in the bank, he'd be back in less than a dead lamb's wag. As Gowan went out the batwings, Jay hurried to his little rear office and drew up a brief pen-and-ink bill-of-sale.

It was nine-twenty-eight when Gowan swung back through the batwings, puffing and out of breath. He laid down a clatter of gold and silver coins on the counter. "Didn't have no big bills. Ya'll have t' count all this chicken feed. Sorry as hell." Gowan was puffing, completely out of breath. "Guess ya can't make the nine-thir—"

But Jay had already signed the bill-of-sale and was sliding it forward. "Place is yours." He began scooping the coins into his pocket. "Got no time to count. . . " They could hear the stage already rattling up the street from the big livery barn where it made its daily start westward.

JAY GRABBED his coat from the back of a chair, filled an outside pocket with the last of the loose coins. He ran through the batwings, yelling like a Comanche Indian. Kell Rader, driving the stage, gave him only a sidewise glance, not realizing Jay was determined to leave town right now. Jay ran into the street. He leaped toward the driver's seat, his foot resting momentarily on the hub of the turning wheel. "Want t' go along," he puffed, landing in the seat beside the surprised driver.

"You'll break a leg sometime doin' that," the whiskered old driver cautioned. "You got cash fare?"

"I'm the new guard," Jay laughed. "Don't you usually carry one? You always did every time I ever saw you leave town." He began searching his pockets for cash fare while the yellow prairie crept up toward them on both sides of the sidling rutted lane of the stage road.

"Got no use for a guard to-day," the old driver was explaining. "Got nothin' but five passengers and no money shipment."

Jay counted his fare from one hand to the other, then dumped the proper amount into Rader's outside pocket. "No money shipment, huh?" He closed one eye wisely and let the jolting stage roll his face closer to Rader's. "That why you got an extra rifle along?" A sidewise glance indicated the rifle leaning close to the driver's thigh in addition to the regular one in the boot.

"Sh—sh—" Rader frowned at him, then laughed and whispered, 'I got twenty thousand in gold in a chest under the back seat. Nobody knows it's goin' through an' that's why I'm carryin' no guard." Rader chuckled wisely. "Who'd think I had extra gold with less protection?"

"You talk too much," Jay chided gayly. "I bet somebody's guessed you got gold aboard." The thought of a possible hold-up made the blood speed a little in Jay's veins. It had been a hell of a long time since anything exciting had happened to him.

THE MORNING passed. The sun got high and grew hot. They entered Corkscrew Canyon, the six horse team slowing for the steep grade rising east of Big Boulder defile. Jay saw Rader's startled movement, as if to reach for the extra rifle beside him. A rifle cracked from a big boulder to the left and ahead. Jay heard the thud of the lead slamming into the driver's body. The

reins fell loose from Rader's relaxed grasp. The driver slumped forward, his head and shoulders hanging down across the footbreak pedal.

Jay's right hand had snaked his sixgun. His left swept out and scooped the rifle up. The horses plunged excitedly. Several additional rifle cracks came from beside the trail. Leads whistled over him as Jay leaped forward.

He landed between the rear pair of plunging horses on the jerking and jolting tongue of the stage-coach, holstering the sixgun again, and balancing his body against the heaving bodies of the frightened horses. He got hold of the reins as he ducked down between the bodies of the animals which protected him from flying lead and hid him from the bandits. The driver's body had wedged inside the footrail of the stage. It jolted and jerked there, warning Jay what a mutilated heap he, himself, would become if he were jolted from his precarious perch.

Three men armed with rifles rushed down from cover. Two leaped toward the plunging horses while the third covered the stage with his weapon. Jay caught glimpses of them above the backs of the horses. He pulled back on the reins to help stop the stage and a grim smile of satisfaction creased his lips. The hold-up men must have decided their fusillade had done for him also and that his body was bouncing along somewhere on the gear.

One of the bandits leaped alongside the plunging fore team and got hold of a bridle strap. Jay helped him pull the horses in without him being aware of it. As the beasts gradually slowed, he waited patiently for their plunging and prancing to stop, then rising deliberately, sixgun in hand again, he shot the nearest bandit through the head.

Rifle fire broke out as Jay ducked back. The lead thumped into the horse protecting him and Jay had to leap up and over it's nervous teammate to escape its death struggle. A bullet sliced flesh along his left ribs as he gained comparative safety behind the right side horse.

The stage was still now. Jay dashed back to it, threw himself flat on the ground, aimed the rifle carefully between the spokes of the two front wheels and killed the bandit who was covering the stage. The third outlaw took to his heels, trying to regain protection of the nearby boulders. A lead from Jay's borrowed rifle caught him in the throat as he turned in an attempt to toss lead back at Jay.

THE FIVE horses were plunging wildly but the harness held them to the dead one and, after a time, Jay got them quieted. Then he turned to the stage from which the five frightened passengers had emerged. His eyes opened wider in utter amazement.

Alice Brokerley came running toward him. She was excited, terribly excited. She stood facing him, her eyes flashing, her body quivering, almost touching his own. "Oh, oh," she cried, "if I'd only had a gun. If I'd only had a gun."

Jay stood looking at her in amazement. She glanced at three citified-appearing men and a terrified pale-faced woman who stood at the door of the stage. "They were all scared to death. Say, this is the only excitement I've seen; this is what I came west for."

Jay rolled his tongue in his cheek and looked at her wonderingly. It was a time when he wished he had a cigar to roll into a corner of his mouth, not because he liked cigars, but because he wanted to appear nonchalant. "You act as if you enjoyed it," he said quietly. Neither of them was paying any attention whatever to the four startled stage passengers who stood gaping at them.

"I'd heard so much about this country," the girl enthused. Jay was thinking she was more beautiful than ever now that she was excited. "When my mother died and left me alone I decided to come out here on the pretext of teaching school."

Jay raised an eyebrow.

"The Brokerleys were so good to me. They practically adopted me. I just couldn't bear to hurt their feel-

ings until. . . . " She suddenly broke under some inner tension. "You wouldn't understand," she cried, her little body quivering. "Nobody ever does. I'm one of those people that just don't fit in; I have to be doing something all the time. You came along and I thought maybe you were like that, then I decided you were a. . . . " She stopped again. "But you certainly aren't a coward. I think I know now why you sold the saloon and why. . . . "

"Uh-huh," Jay drawled. He suddenly understood a lot of things, too. "I got to do something about the horses," he said. He had outwardly achieved the nonchalance he sought but everything inside of him was turning handsprings and doing gymnastics in a strange new ecstacy.

Jay got the two lead horses free of the harness and ground-tied them temporarily. He managed to back the other three enough to free their harness of the dead animal and get them hitched to the stage again in workable fashion. All the time he worked, the four passengers stood about and watched him in a sort of dumb wonder. Alice stood by herself, puzzled and hurt, not understanding what was going on in Jay's brain.

When Jay had things arranged as he wanted them, he approached the passengers. "If one o' you hombres," he drawled, "can drive and will take things easy, you won't have any trouble getting back to Ridgetown. There's no bad grades between here and there."

THEY WERE a dumb lot of tenderfeet but he finally got the man who had his wife along loaded back inside the stage and the other two up on the driver's place from which he had helped them load poor old Rader's body inside. He didn't mention to them that they had a load of gold. Better chance of everyone getting back safely if no one knew.

Alice started to climb inside but Jay took her arm. "You're not to go back with them," he told her. His voice vibrated slightly, wondering what her reaction would be.

She looked at him, hesitated briefly, then, as if his orders were being obeyed by everyone, she stepped back obediently. They stood side by side, not looking at each other, both watching the stage draw away from them. Finally she said, "I've heard there's a standing reward for killing

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stage robbers." She looked at him as if this was something safe she could say.

"Yeah," Jay said, "that will pay for the two horses we're taking." He turned to the ground-tied team. He talked to the girl while he worked, tying their harness so it wouldn't drag. "Won't be very comfortable riding for a girl, I reckon, but you said you were looking for adventure." His tongue felt dry in his mouth and he was still a little afraid he might have made a mistake in reading what he had seen in the girl's eyes. There was nothing left now, though, but to bluff it on through and see what came of it.

"I can't go riding off alone with you like this," she said.

"It'll be more adventurous than standing here alone in the desert," Jay said. He took her hand, tried to hide the thrill that touching it imparted to him, and suggested gently that she mount one of the horses.

She protested. A little frown came in her forehead. Jay saw he was about to have trouble so he said. "It isn't very far, only about ten miles, maybe three hours the way we'll have to travel. Place is called Resthaven. That's because there's some shade threes there. There isn't much else

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but there's a church."

"A church?" Alice was still plainly puzzled.

"Where there's a church, there's a preacher," Jay said.

"A preacher?" Her lips quivered slightly. Her frown lifted, then came again.

"You are looking for adventure," Jay reminded. "So am I. You couldn't stand Ridgetown; it was too dull. Neither could I. You enjoyed a good gun fight and so did I."

She was standing facing him squarely, her lips slightly open, her eyes very wide. "Y—you mean?"

"I mean you were right about me being a coward back there in Ridgetown. I was afraid to ask you. And you're right about me not being a coward any more. I'm asking you to ride the river with me for keeps."

She looked at him what seemed an awful long time. Jay felt his heart hammering against his ribs and he felt his breath contracted in his chest, making it feel tight and heavy. Her lips closed, opened, then finally she began to smile just a little and she moved gently toward him. "Oh, so the West is really like they told me," she said. She was smiling, then, with tears in her eyes, and Jay was kissing her.

(THE END)

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Posses were combing the country for the Slaughter Kid.

THE SLAUGHTER KID

By LEE THOMAS

A True Story of the Old West

THROUGH THE annals of Western badmen move a galaxy of tough gunmen who, though they had plenty of sand and bravery, never attained the publicity that some of their contemporaries achieved. Whatever caused their ill-deeds to go almost unrecognized down into history no man seems to know. The Slaughter Kid was one of these unsung outlaws who, though a tough, hardened man, never became much of a figure in the public eye as did various of his lawless contemporaries, the Daltons and their gang of night-riders.

A slender, seemingly modest young cowboy, he made the Cherokee Nations his stomping grounds. One summer evening he and four other men rode into Dover, Oklahoma. There, right in front of the station, they robbed the south-bound train; they took almost a thousand dollars from the passengers.

The Slaughter Kid collected the money in his big hat. Behind him walked one of his gang, his gun covering the frightened passengers.

"The Ol' shell game," the Kid chuckled. "Only you shell out without a chance. The hand is faster than the eye—" He halted suddenly, glaring at a man who stood between the seats, his hands shoulder high. "You're a United States deputy marshal, ain't you?"

The man admitted he was.

"Seems to me that you an' me has tangled a few times," said the Slaughter Kid. "An' you came out best once or twice."

"I guess you'd call it that," said the man.

"Give my regards to your boss," said the Kid, "and tell him that someday I aim to tack his hide up on some boxelder tree. An' as for you, dig deep an' contribute—"

The man put his money in the hat. "That's all I have," he said.

"'T'ain't much." The Slaughter Kid scowled. "Here, I got a little present for you." He carried a .45 in his right fist. The gun made a crash across the marshal's forehead. Blood spurted and the man fell back on his seat. His limp body sprawled forward and he slid into the aisle. Behind him, the Slaughter Kid heard a gasp. He turned; then he smiled and nodded to the young girl and said, "He ain't dead, miss. Jus' knocked to sleep for a coupla hours or so. Nothin' serious."

"Somebody should kill you," she said huskily.

"Somebody will someday," said the Slaughter Kid. "But I ain't worried, Miss. . . ."

THOSE TWO sentences were perhaps the truest statement the Slaughter Kid probably ever made in his short, hectic, lawless, career. Although lawmen rode the Cherokee Strip ranges, their .45s light in leather, their rifles loose in scabbards, still the Slaughter Kid seemed to have no fear of death. Even when the infamous Dalton gang, when it robbed the Coffeyville bank, almost met total annihilation, this bloody killing seemed to have little effect on the Slaughter Kid, who went his own way with a few well-chosen and faithful gunmen.

His early life seems to be shrouded in mystery. He lived in a time when a man was as strong as the gun on his hip was accurate and speedy. He was, when judged by the light of his times, not as deadly and ruthless as the Daltons—but was a killer and thief. His life is not a life to admire, but it is a story that makes interesting reading.

Records show that once he had been an honest cowpuncher. He went up the trails, moving cattle to the north either for breeding purposes or for sale to the railheads and markets.

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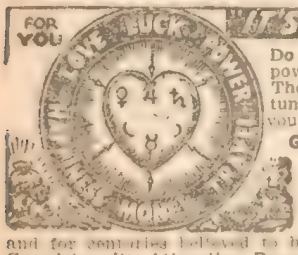

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But this life evidently was too tame for the man known as the Slaughter Kid. The wages of a cowpuncher were small and the Kid evidently wanted more monetary returns for his time spent. Accordingly he started robbing banks and trains. After a while, a hardy soul at his best, his light attracted men of lesser ilk, as a candle attracts moths. Usually he had about four men riding with him.

ONE BY one, these men came to their ends. After the Dover holdup the gang pulled out without a shot fired at them. They rode openly, heading toward the north. A posse finally caught up with them in the sandhills. Bellies dragging on the sand, they left their horses and crawled across the hills, hoping to get the gang unawares and kill them as they slept.

But Tulsa Jack was on guard. Squatting under a dune, he watched the men come, his lips cold; when they were within range he opened fire with his rifle. His reports brought the Slaughter Kid and the other three outlaws out of their blankets. They did not need to be told what was happening by yonder sand-dunes. The Slaughter Kid's voice broke across the roar of the rifles.

"You all right, Tulsa?"

"They got me," cried out Tulsa. "High up. . . above my hip."

"Why didn't you see them before they got so close?"

Tulsa Jack grinned. "I did, but I figured there was no use a-wakenin' you boys too soon. Reckon I got a few of 'em but there's more of 'em than I thought. By hell, I think I'm goin' kick the bucket."

"You'll get well an' rob another bank."

But Tulsa Jack died in a few minutes. The posse had captured the gang's horses. With rifle fire they drove the lawmen back and got two horses. They rode out, riding double.

They lost the posse. Next morning they stopped at a ranch house for breakfast. An old man lived there alone. He recognized them. To silence him, the Slaughter Kid shot him through the head and killed him.

(Continued On Page 94)

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(Continued From Page 92)

For some time he holed up at a ranch operated by two Dunn brothers. From here he and his gang made their forays. But the law was riding him close all the time, and every movement he made was watched. Sooner or later a rifle, speaking from some high butte, would knock him from saddle.

He knew that. But, so records say, his smile grew more grim, his face never lost its devil-be-damnedness. He even attended country dances, swinging the belles to the scrape of a fiddle, the cacophony of a battered piano. Sometimes a lawman, getting a tip as to the Kid's whereabouts, would ride up to the dance with his deputies. . . . but by that time the Slaughter Kid would usually be gone. Or, if he still remained, a bitter fight was in prospect. And, when the gunsmoke settled, the Kid had ridden off, most of the time untouched by a bullet.

One time he hid his men in the brush and rode up to a ranch-house. Dawn was coloring the Oklahoma hills. The gang was gaunt after a raid and the Kid was looking the ranch over as a prospect for a meal. But, instead of ranchers inside the house, a group of law officers had hidden there.

The Slaughter Kid dismounted warily. Only then did the guns roar from inside the house. His own .45 jabbing flame, the Kid hit his saddle and rode out. Despite the odds against him he escaped without a scratch. A number of officers of the law never liked to have the conversation switch to that trap in later years. . . .

But the Slaughter Kid was reaching the end of his lass-rope. The Dunn brothers, half-renegades themselves, decided to make some money —and the money they aimed to collect was offered for the Slaughter Kid's touseled head. Accordingly, they made a deal with the law and, in return, they became deputy-marshals. The Slaughter Kid trusted them, and went to bed unsuspecting.

(Continued On Page 112)

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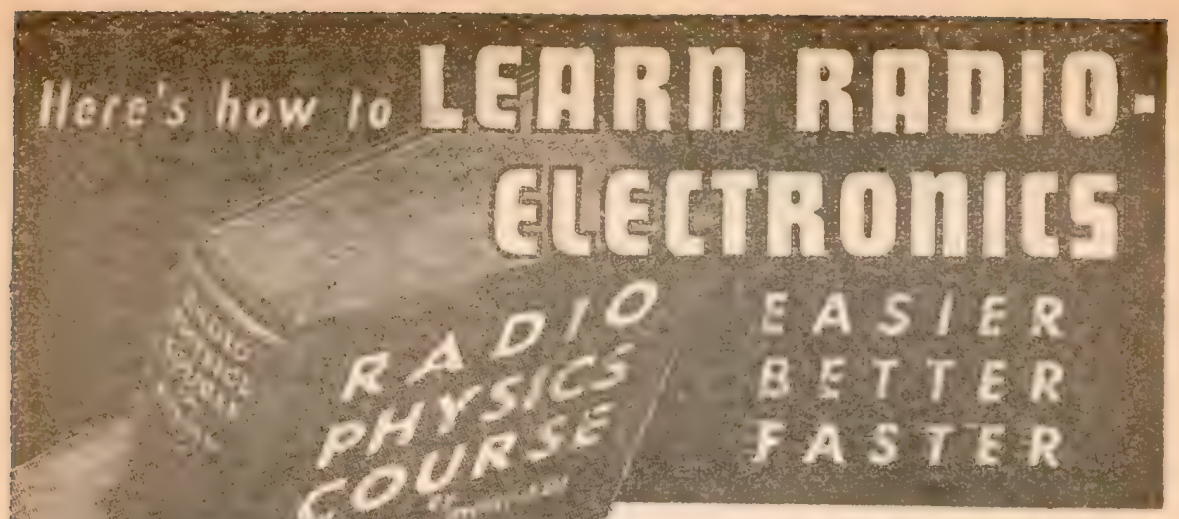

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By Joe Payne

The Kid seemed hellbent to be a Ranger, and they gave him his chance — only to see him fold up and turn tail on his first assignment.

THE STORY of the kid spread like wildfire. People blamed me. I should have stopped him, they said. He was a good man; one that the service couldn't afford to lose. But they didn't know all of the story.

Texas was still tough in those days and so was a Ranger captain's job. I was at my desk that morning, worrying about how to spread a hundred men over a thousand places, when I heard a cough. The kid was leaning against the doorway, his hat pushed back, watching me with a kind of half-grin on his face.

"You McLarren?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "What's your complaint?"

Without straightening, the kid flicked away a cigarette butt. "The name is Echols," he said. "I want to join the Rangers."

I took a closer look at him. For an instant, I had a teasing sense of having seen him before, but there was nothing I could place. He must have been around twenty-one or two, although he seemed younger at first glance. His cheeks were brown and flat and his grey eyes rather flinty-looking. But it was that grin of his I noticed most. Above all, I prided myself on my ability to judge a man and somehow this kid struck me right.

"Can you shoot?" I asked him.

Before I could protest, he slipped the gun from his holster, eyeing a small tin can down the street. His snap shot raised a dust-puff under the can and the can itself moved a foot or so. Just one man I had ever known could have shot as well, but that was something I preferred to forget.

Well, I might not have done it so fast in other circumstances but we needed men, as I already said.

"Listen," I told him. "Over at Sage City, Sheriff Sam Renfro is hollering for help. Last week he ran smack into a rustling outfit. This week he's sitting around all bandaged up. His deputy was killed." I paused to let this sink in. "Somebody has got to keep things quiet in Sage City. If you joined the Rangers, that would be your first job."

The kid didn't hesitate. "I'll take it," he said.

WELL, I gave him the routine tests and sent him on. But ten days later something came in the mail that made me stare like a man that's seen a ghost. It was an envelope containing Echols' badge. No explanation. Just three lines saying that he was resigning. And in the same mail a note from Sam that only added to my apprehension. It took me ten minutes to send a telegram and leave a few instructions at the

office but when the stage left for Sage City, I was on it. . . .

* * *

In Sage City I went directly to the Silver Spur Saloon. It was already past noon but Echols hadn't shown up yet. But several men were talking at the bar with their backs to me and one of their voices stopped me short.

I think I must have expected Britt—even though I now heard them calling him "Sollers." The whole thing was like an old pattern repeated. Five years are not so long and of course he had changed his name. But his tall frame was as bulky as ever and his bull-like voice still arrogant sounding. As he moved his head, I could see the scar that ran from his temple half the length of one swarthy cheek.

"So young Echols has quit wearing guns," he was saying. "Didn't give no reason, I hear."

"Maybe you're the reason, Sollers," somebody suggested. He winked at the others.

Sollers. That was the name that Sam Renfro had given in his report. The sheriff had heard of Britt five years ago, of course, but had never seen him, so names meant nothing to him.

Britt's laughter rumbled. "Maybe. There's people in Sage City that's wondering."

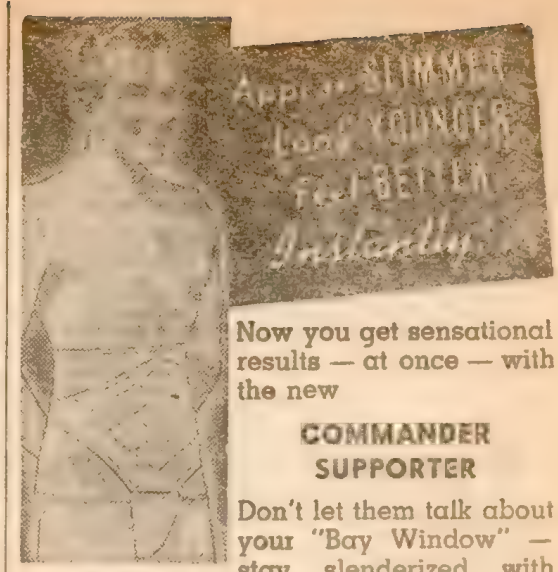
"The kid's different," somebody else put it. "He's lost his nerve. D'you reckon he's figurin' on stayin' in Sage City?"

Britt swung a heavy silver watch chain idly. "I doubt it," he answered. "In fact, I don't expect he will."

He turned then and saw me. Of course, he had known I would come and he knew how I'd be feeling. His black eyes gleamed with amusement as we measured each other.

"So!" he exclaimed. "It's the lawman. Imagine seeing you here, McLarren."

"I get around, Britt," I said sourly. "Or is it Sollers now? Well, a rose by any other name."



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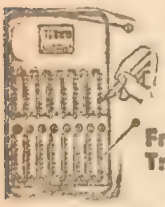

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He laughed loudly. "And a nursemaid by any other name. Men don't change much, do they, McLarren?"

A SILENCE. I followed the gaze of the others. Young Echols had just pushed through the batwing doors. I saw at once that he had changed. Not so much physically. But that cool half-grin was gone. In place of it there was tension and his eyes were shifty looking. As Britt had said, he wasn't wearing a gun.

Britt said, with exaggerated politeness. "It's on me, Echols."

The kid nodded, accepting a glass from the bartender. But he didn't speak. He kept staring before him across the bar.

Britt glanced at me mockingly. He grinned and moved in front of the kid. "I hear you're leaving town," he said with a show of concern. "Is it so?"

Echols finished his drink. He set down his glass slowly, looking at Britt's watch-chain. "Maybe," he said. "I haven't made up my mind."

"It's a long time till morning," Britt said genially. "I'll make a suggestion. There's a stage leaving at eight. You could get that easy."

The kid turned away without a word and I followed him out, quick color flooding my face. Behind my back, I could hear the snickers starting.

It was blazing hot as we strode toward the Casa Blanca where Sam Ranfro lived. The plank walk was nearly deserted, only a few Mexicans lolling sleepily in shadowy doorways. A half-dozen cow ponies drooped at the hitch-rails before the frame buildings that fronted the street. Ahead of us on the veranda of the Casa Blanca, Sam sat in a wheel chair, watching our progress.

"I suppose I ought to blame myself," I said grimly. "You're not the first that's tucked his tail between his legs at the sight of him."

"No doubt," said Echols. His boot-heels thumped hollowly on the boards.

"Lots of men have reputations,

What's he got that makes some men curl up inside themselves?"

The kid's head jerked toward me. "Sometimes things have got to be done a certain way," he said sharply. "Why didn't you stay in Austin?"

I studied him carefully. "Has he got something on you, kid?"

We reached the Casa Blanca but the kid went on without answering. I bit my lip and stepped onto the veranda where Sam was watching from his wheel chair. Sam's leathery face was glum as he nodded after Echols.

"What do you make of it, Mike?" he asked.

After the sun, the veranda's shade felt good. I sank gratefully into a bull-hide chair. The narrow length of the town lay before us, heat waves trembling above the tawny dust of the street.

"Sage City's changed some, Sam. But so have you, old crow. I never expected to see you in a wheel chair, all bandaged up like you had the gout."

Sam snorted impatiently. "You were talkin' to him. What'd he say?"

"Nothing at all. Let's have your version."

"Buck fever," Sam said promptly. "When he first showed up, I liked him fine. He kept mostly to himself. Didn't have much to say but I got the impression that he could take care of himself. Then Sollers came back."

"I've not been in Sage City for three years," I put in. "Where does this Sollers fit in?"

"HE'S FIT in a cell if I could prove anything," Sam growled. "It's one of them things, Mike. He drifted into town a couple of years ago and set himself up in the Silver Spur. Everybody figures he's been the brains behind the Banlee crowd. I was hopin' I'd run onto him the day I got this. . . ." Sam indicated his bandaged foot.

"You said he was gone when Echols came."

"On one of his trips which every-

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body suspects are for takin' care of the receivin' end of Banlee's rustlin'. Well, as I said, he come back. And your ranger began to back water pronto." Suddenly Sam hit the chair arm a smack with his hand. "By the old Harry, Mike, you and me are goin' to be the laughin' stock of Texas! I know you been pressed, but damn it all, this was no place to send an untried kid. This Sollers is an old hand. He's got considerable reputation with a gun."

"Spare me the details," I said wearily. "You remember the case of Loring and Britt five years ago?"

Comprehension dawned slowly in Sam's eyes. "Yeah, you told me about it once. Same kind of case, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I sent young Loring to Centro. Sollers' name was Britt then. Nobody could pin him down then, either. He got Loring's nerve. Loring turned in his badge like Echols has done. But he was shot before he got out of town. Of course, I couldn't prove it was Britt."

Sam nodded somberly. "So now he's showed up here. Well, one incident like that is about all the Rangers can stand. What's your move?"

I rose from my chair. The sun was beginning to lower along the pale steel dome of the sky but heat waves still danced grotesquely between the frame buildings. I pushed my hat back on my head, letting a long breath out slowly through my nostrils.

"This thing hits me hard," I said. "Five years ago I'd have staked my life on Loring. And now this. . . . Let's go inside, Sam. After supper I'll talk to Echols."

* * *

IT WAS dusk when I reached the 'dobe at the end of the street where the kid was living. He had finished supper and was smoking morosely in the kitchen. He got up without surprise and lit a kerosene lamp, motioning me to a chair.

I sat silently for a while. The lamplight streamed over Echols' face,

throwing its features into relief. As I watched him, I felt again the tense sense of familiarity and again was unable to place it. Finally I began talking, feeling my way.

"I can't afford to make mistakes in judging men. And as far as I know, I've only made one. Beyond the obvious things, Echols, I don't know much about you. This afternoon I asked you something. Now I want a straight answer. Has Britt got a hold on you?"

"No."

"I think I've seen you before somewhere," I said slowly. "I know you've got no record in Texas. But I've seen hundreds of posters from different states. Maybe your face was on one of them."

The kid laughed harshly. "I missed a prison record. And I've never been wanted in any state."

"Let that drop, then. But there's more to this than a man quitting his job. I'll tell you a story. It's about a young Ranger named Loring."

"I had a brother once," the kid said, eyeing me levelly.

It hit me then—hard. I should have known, of course, although the resemblance was far from striking. Jack Loring had worn a moustache and his face had been fuller, too. I carefully bit the end off a cigar and set a match to it while I got hold of myself. Across the kitchen table, the kid smiled ironically.

"So that's it," I said finally. "I remember now that Loring had a kid brother. You must have been pretty young when he died."

"Sixteen."

"So you waited until you were twenty-one and joined the Rangers. Why?"

"Because I wanted to be a Ranger. I wanted to help make Texas too small for men like Britt."

"Why turn in your badge, then?"

The kid's face tightened. "They said Jack was a coward, McLarren. He died with a blot on his name that shouldn't have been there. I'm aiming to wipe it out."

"You take a peculiar way of doing

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it. You say you know Jack wasn't a coward. How?"

"He had a plan. He told me about it. You'd sent him to Centro after Rance Britt. Everybody knew that Britt was a skunk and ought to be got rid of, just like they know it here now. But Britt was cagey. There wasn't anything Jack could arrest him for."

"Go on."

"He had Britt figured for a blowhard. He knew Britt liked to show off. So he started avoiding him. He made out that Britt was getting his nerve. Then he turned in his badge. He thought that sooner or later Britt would start something."

I STUDIED the kid. "Meaning that he intended to let Britt goad him into a personal quarrel. Figuring he could kill Britt then since he wouldn't be wearing a badge?"

"That's it. But Britt or one of his crowd got him first." The kid's face darkened. "By God, McLarren, the story got around that Britt had met my brother that night; that Jack was too yellow to go for his gun. You believed that yourself. But I say he was shot from cover. Britt might have been fast with a gun but you know damn well he couldn't have got Jack before he could clear leather."

"Not likely," I admitted. "What's to prevent Britt from getting you the same way?"

"Everybody knows I'm not packing a gun. That's where Jack made his mistake. If I'm found shot, it'll be plain murder. Britt's too smart for that."

I changed my tactics. "If Jack had a plan like that, why didn't he tell me?"

"I'm telling you."

"All right. You're telling me."

The kid lit another cigarette. He blew a long smoke-streamer through his nose. "I was only sixteen but I began practicing with a gun. I wanted to be ready for the Rangers. I never really expected to see Britt again. But you sent me here. And here he was. That changed everything."

(Continued On Page 104)

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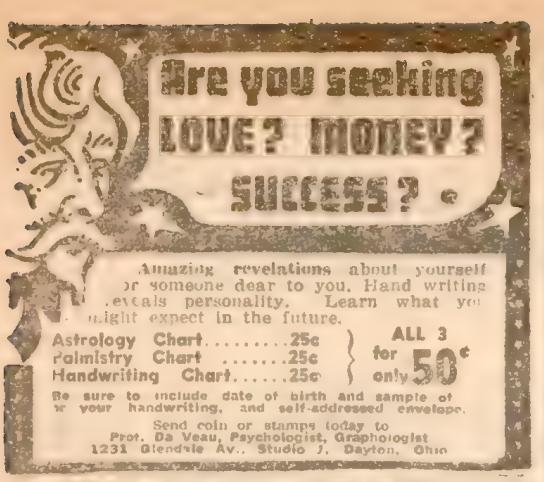

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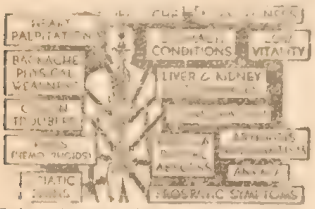

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(Continued From Page 102)

I turned that over in my mind. Outside, the darkness pressed close against the window panes and the night-chill came seeping into the room. Somewhere down the street, hoof-beats drummed loudly, then faded away into muffled distance.

"Your story is wild but it could be true," I said. "Jack was almost as young as you are. His impatience might have overridden his judgment. On the other hand, he might actually have been afraid of Britt and told you the story to cover it up. But if Jack had a scheme like that he didn't tell me because he knew it wasn't the way a Ranger could work. He knew I'd never allow a Ranger to kill a man that way—even Rance Britt."

The kid was silent. I laughed shortly.

"You almost had me fooled," I said. "I was almost ready to believe that you turned in your badge because your desire to kill Rance Britt was stronger than your desire to be a Ranger. Now I think you turned it in because you were afraid to wear it with Britt around. You're making the Rangers a laughing stock. Yet I'm almost sorry for you, kid. Either you or Britt will have to leave on the morning stage. I hope you're not foolish enough to think that Britt will run."

"I'll be taking the stage," said the kid. "Britt won't."

I left him then and walked slowly back through the darkness to the Casa Blanca and to bed. . . but not to sleep. . . .

IT HAPPENED the next morning. Sam and I were smoking on the veranda. The sun was well up but the early morning coolness still lingered in the air. The kid came swinging down the street past us, the blue smoke from his cigarette trailing lazily behind him. As he reached the Silver Spur, Rance Britt stepped out through the bat-wing doors and confronted him.

We could see the whole thing plainly. The kid hesitated, making out as if to step around the other. But Britt had taken a position directly in the middle of the walk. He was

(Continued On Page 106)

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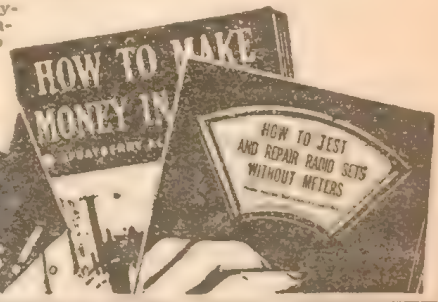

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(Continued From Page 104)

standing, hands on hips and head outthrust, a sneer on his swarthy face. People were staring from doorways all along the street and it was easy to see from the roving of Britt's eyes and the way he lifted his voice, that he was aware of his audience.

"Echols, it's almost time for the stage," he said stridently. "Why haven't you got your belongings with you?"

The kid didn't say anything but two white, pinched-looking spots appeared at the base of his nose. He kept staring at the watch-chain across Britt's vest.

Britt raised his voice higher: "It's an old story, Echols. This town's too small for the two of us. One of us has got to leave. Myself, I like the town. If you was packing a gun, I could talk to you like a man. As it is, I'm advising you to go pack your bag in a hurry. I'll be waiting to see that it's done."

The pinched look deepened about the kid's nose. His hand shook a little as he pulled the cigarette from his mouth. "I've got a right to stay where I please," he said.

Britt stepped ahead then. His hand swept backward, then forward, and his palm smacked against the kid's cheek loud enough to be heard the length of the street. "Maybe that'll help you on your way, yellow-belly!"

I leaned forward, watching the kid. His shifty look had changed. His eyes blazed in the tense whiteness of his face.

"The name is Loring, Britt!" he said.

He swung on his heel then away from the other. As he passed the veranda, he glanced up but he didn't say anything; just went swinging steadily by.

I settled back, watching Britt. The big man was staring after the kid, his black eyes narrowed. He turned toward Sam and me and his look was calculating. Finally he left the board walk and crossed the street.

"The black-souled hellion!" Sam muttered, breathing hard. "For two cents I'd jump out of this chair, leg or no leg, and arrest him!"

(Continued On Page 108)

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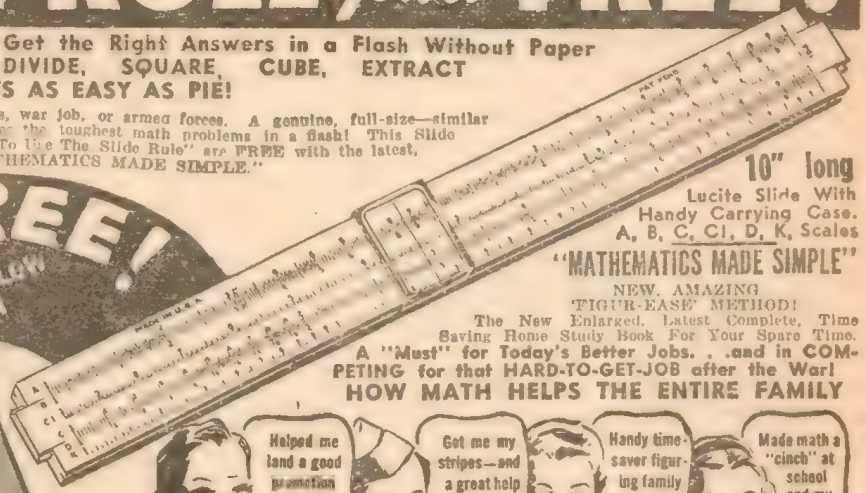

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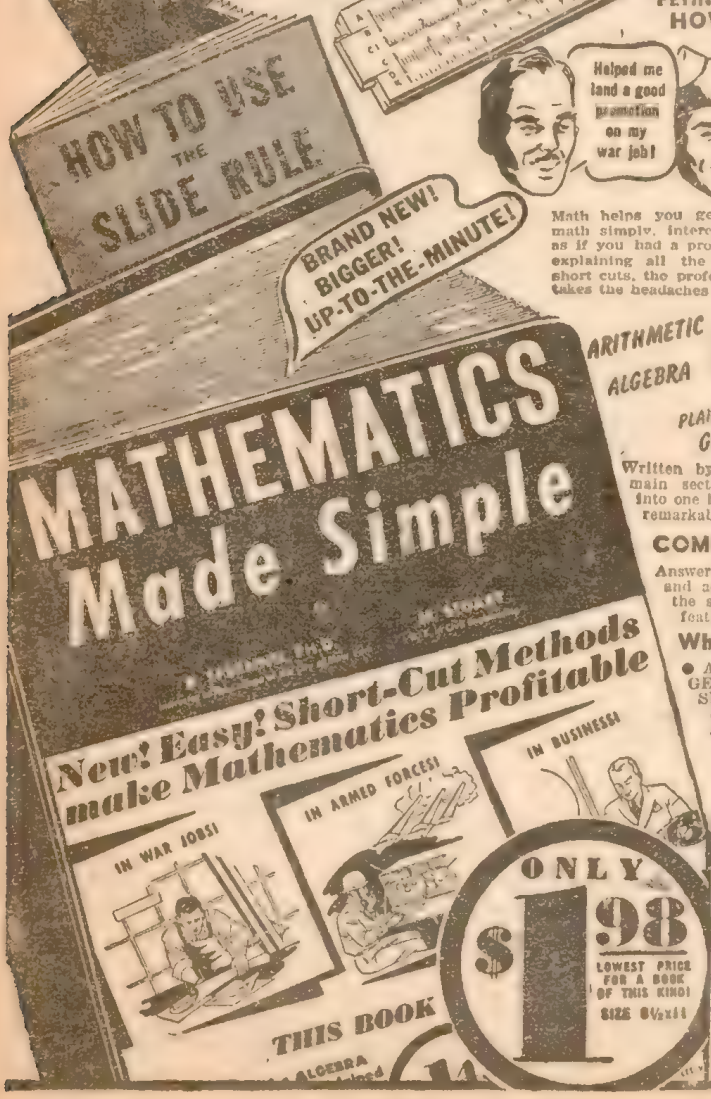

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 106)

"What for?" I asked heavily. "Disturbing the peace? He'd laugh at ten days in the local calaboose."

"He's laughin' now! Crowdin' another Loring is water on his wheel. The kid will be laughed out of every town in Texas. And we might as well crawl in our holes."

WE REMAINED quietly on the veranda. The sun was higher now and a hint of coming heat was in the air. From out of the west the eight o'clock stage grew on the horizon, yellow dust streaming behind it like a ribbon of smoke. Swaying to the drive of pistoning horse-hooves, it rolled into town and pulled up at the stage line office across the street. Two passengers got out and entered the office, traveling bags in their hands. The fine dust settled but the scene still glimmered hazily through the smoke from my cigar. From somewhere along the street a dull hammering sound broke the silence.

I stirred uneasily in my chair. Sam was staring over his shoulder. The hammering sound was getting louder. It had become a hollow measured thumping that moved steadily nearer us.

I peered along the walk behind. The kid was striding toward us, his boot-heels drumming slowly on the loose planks of the walk. A traveling bag was in his hand but he stopped and set it down on the walk just opposite the waiting stage. He walked on again, passing us without a glance, two black-butted guns swinging low from holsters strapped to his thighs. The cool half-grin that I had seen in Austin was on his lips again.

Sam made a movement beside me but I gripped his arm. "Easy, Sam." Rising casually, I drew a last puff from the cigar and flipped it away, watching the kid move toward the Silver Spur.

A deeper silence settled over the street. Excepting the kid, there was no one in sight but the stage driver who was sitting with his back to us, his reins slack in his hands; no sound but the hollow thumping of the kid's heels. Yet there was a feeling of

(Continued On Page 110)

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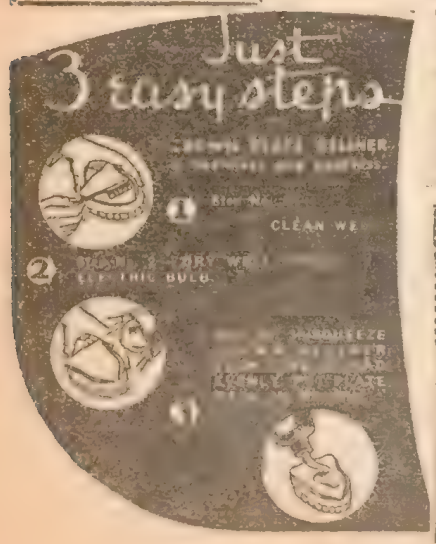

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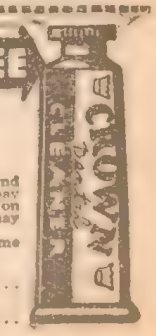

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 108)

watchfulness; of eyes straining from dark doorways and from behind half-drawn blinds. If the kid was aware of it, he gave no sign.

ACROSS THE street, Rance Britt stepped out of the stage line office. He stood there in the sunshine, leaning against the doorway, his face inscrutable as he watched the kid's progress. Once his dark glance flicked toward Sam and me.

The kid reached the Silver Spur. He paused by the bat-wing doors and with a quick shoulder motion, pushed one of them open. He stood a moment, alert, then continued down the street. At the end of the walk he turned and saw Rance Britt. Crossing to the other side, he advanced toward the big man with measured strides.

The man on the stage box looked at his watch. He turned his head negligently toward the office door and gathered up his reins. Rance Britt straightened. He stepped quietly to the middle of the walk. Vulture-like, he faced the kid, bent forward a little, his shoulders held high. The kid's grin was still on his face. His boot-heels thumped on steadily.

Britt drew first. One instant his hand was poised; the next it blurred down and up and the gun was in it. Two shots blasted. The kid's hat flew from his head. Smoke eddied away from both men.

Britt's brows were lifted queerly. He took two stumbling steps forward. His knees buckled then and he fell face-downward to the walk. He lay there quietly in the glare of the sun.

A sound swept the street, like held breath exploding from a hundred throats. Then the talk began; mutters at first, but swelling into a roar of excited voices. On the stage box, the driver still gazed, his neck twisted ludicrously.

The kid holstered his gun. He crossed the street to where he had set his traveling bag. He stopped then and turned toward the veranda, eyeing me with a kind of expectant look on his face.

I eyed him back. A man has a right to walk the street and to defend him-

(Continued On Page 112)

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Yellow Belly

(Continued From Page 110)

self. Other than that, I had nothing to say.

The kid picked up his traveling bag. He walked to the stage, said something to the driver, and disappeared inside the vehicle. Slowly the stage began to roll. A yellow dust-cloud formed behind its quickening wheels. And that was the last I ever saw of young Loring.

The End

Five Graves to Gunsmoke

(Continued From Page 82)

the store. In the doorway the pair stood, Barbara wrapped in the arms of The Hombre. The two men moved on further.

It was some minutes later as they moved about an open plot beside where the postoffice had been. Darcy was tracing lines with a stick as Montana made suggestion.

"Hey, what're you two coots doing? Gone locoed?" The Hombre sang out as he came walking along with Barbara on his arm.

"Not exactly," answered the beaming Darcy. "Me and Montana are just a-laying out the barroom we're going to open here when work gits started. . . . Now we'll have the bar counter on this side, Montan. . . ."

The End

The Slaughter Kid

(Continued From Page 94)

That night they tiptoed to the Kid's room. There in the darkness, they slipped inside, guns raised. With the Kid was a henchman sleeping in another bunk. Then the guns bucked and recoiled and cordite stung the nostrils of the two killers. They fired shot after shot. . . .

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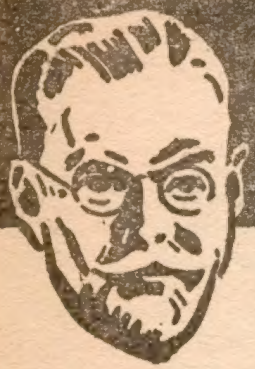

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Statistics show that 23,000 people at home today will be in a hospital tomorrow. You'll want the best for yourself and family if hospitalization is needed.

Our 3c a day Plan offers the help you need if you act now.

GET OUR FREE OFFER!

Learn how hospital and surgical care is provided for every member of your family in case of sickness or accident. Our Plan permits you to go to any hospital in the U. S.; select your own surgeon

NEARLY EVERYONE IS ELIGIBLE!

An attractive feature of the Plan we offer is that it is available to almost everyone. Any man or woman under 70 years of age may enroll as a member, and, if married, include wife or husband and all children under 18 years of age as dependents on the same certificate, and no medical examination is required.

Maternity Cases Included

Your policy provides for hospitalization for maternity as well, provided that both husband and wife have been members for 12 consecutive months prior to admission to the hospital.

Here's the Protection We Offer You

$150.00 Hospital Room **$20.00 X-Ray**
$150.00 Surgical Fees **$20.00 Anesthesia**
$20.00 Laboratory Fees.
. . . Also Operating Room, Maternity, Ambulance and others.

DETAILS FREE

NO AGENT WILL CALL

RUSH COUPON

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION REQUIRED

No Waiting . . . No Red Tape

You'll agree our Plan is amazingly liberal, and offers the protection that you and your family need.

FREE RUSH COUPON FOR DETAILS

We want every reader of this magazine to know how easy it is to enjoy the protection we offer . . . we urge you not to delay it but to get the free details at once. Just sign your name to the coupon and mail it to us. You may paste it on the back of a penny postcard if you like. We will send you everything by return mail absolutely free and without obligation. Yau may act in confidence and no salesman will call. You will only hear from us by mail, so do not hesitate to act at once . . . no better time than now.

INTERSTATE MUTUAL BENEFIT ASS'N.
DEPT. 2706, DOVER, DELAWARE

Please send me FREE full details concerning your Hospitalization Policy.

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ADDRESS .....

CITY & ZONE .....

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City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....*Working Hours* .....*A.M. to*.....*P.M.*

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Your Hospital and Doctor Bills PAID

BUY WAR BONDS

LIBERAL CASH BENEFITS INCLUDE

HOSPITAL EXPENSES FOR SICKNESS (Beginning 7th Day) UP TO	$540.00
HOSPITAL EXPENSES FOR ACCIDENT UP TO	$540.00
DOCTOR OR SURGEON EXPENSE FOR ACCIDENT UP TO	$135.00
LOSS OF TIME FROM WORK UP TO	$300.00
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WAR COVERAGE INCLUDED

Plus AMBULANCE SERVICE EXPENSE . . . *cash payments for* PHYSICAL DISMEMBERMENT, *etc.*

SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

Don't allow Hospitalization expense to ruin your life savings. Insure NOW at low cost . . . *before it's too late!* The famous North American Plan provides that, in case of unexpected sickness or accident, you may go to any Hospital in the U. S. or Canada under any Doctor's care. Your expenses will be paid for you in strict accordance with Policy provisions.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION

One individual or entire family (birth to age 70) is eligible. Unusual features of the North American Hospitalization Plan are its provisions for Doctor fees in case of accident and a liberal $1,000.00 Accidental Death benefit. Also, as a civilian, you get War Risk coverage at no extra charge. For solid, dependable, economical protection North American has won the approval of leading Hospitals and physicians throughout the United States. The company is under the supervision of the Insurance Department. No agent will call.

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NORTH AMERICAN MUTUAL INSURANCE CO.
Dept. D5-6, Wilmington, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, details about your "3c A Day Hospitalization Insurance Plan."

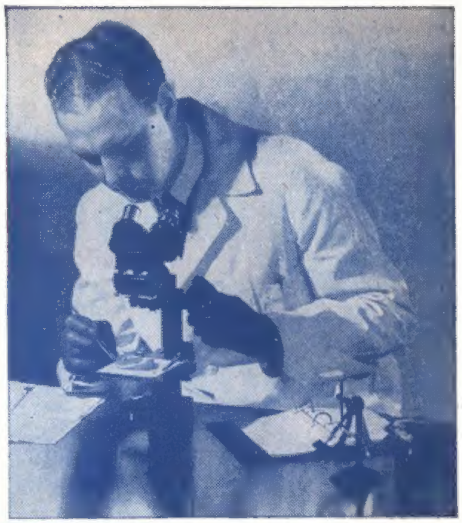
Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Fill in and clip this coupon. Mail in envelope or paste on penny postcard.)

ADVICE FOR
ABUSED SKIN
AFTER YOU WASH AND SHAVE



HAVE you ever stopped to realize that the stars that you admire, as well as the models who have a smooth fine skin, were all born just like you, with a smooth skin?

Almost everyone can have a natural, healthy, normal complexion which gains admiration and is pleasing to look at. All you must do, is to follow the simple rules of nature. Screen stars give their skin special attention. So should you because everyone looks at your face. Your social success may depend upon your being good looking and pleasant to look at. A fine skin may be a short cut to success in love and business. Your pleasure is worth it, and you owe it to yourself to give yourself a chance to enjoy a healthy complexion. Medical science gives us the truth about your skin. There are small specks of dust all around us most of the time. When these little specks, which are in the air, get into an open pore in your skin they can in time, cause the pore to become larger and more susceptible to dust and infection. These open pores begin to form **blackheads** which become infected and bring you all of the misery of **pimples, irritations,** or **blemishes.** When you neglect your skin and abuse it by not giving it the necessary external care it requires, you leave yourself wide open for external skin miseries which cause embarrassment, self-consciousness, inferiority, and make you feel like a prisoner within yourself. When you know that your skin is smooth, white, and fine, you have more confidence and it helps improve your personality and your entire well being. A flawless skin is priceless, yet it only costs you a few pennies daily to keep it normal, natural, more healthy and smooth. Many never realize or even suspect that the difference between having a smooth complexion and being ordinary is just the difference between having blackheads and pimples, and not having them. A little care and the proper attention with the double Viderm treatment can mean the difference between enjoying fine skin or missing out on many pleasures because of an ugly, abused skin. The double Viderm Treatment is made under the supervision of a doctor and costs you only a few cents for a treatment which you can give yourself.

Just write or mail the coupon below, and you will receive two jars of the double Viderm treatment with full directions which are written by a doctor. One jar contains a jelly-like formula which is a highly concentrated soap which penetrates and acts as an antiseptic upon the pores. This is used after you **wash and shave** your face in the usual way. After you use the special Viderm skin cleanser, you apply the Viderm fortified medicated skin cream. You rub this in, leaving an almost invisible protective covering for the surface of your skin. This double treatment has worked wonders for so many cases of abused skin and it must work for you, too, or it won't cost you a penny. You must be absolutely pleased within ten days, or your money will be cheerfully refunded. It is a guaranteed treatment. Enjoy it. Send for it now. Use your double Viderm treatment every day, until your skin is as smooth and clear as you may want it. Then, use it only once a week to remove dust specks that infect your pores and to aid in healing external irritations. When you prevent blackheads, you prevent externally caused skin miseries and pimples.

Just send your name and address, or if you wish you can save postage and C.O.D. fee by mailing Two Dollars with your order. Mail the coupon to the New York Skin Laboratory, Dept. DA-6, 206 Division Street, New York City 2, New York.

NEW YORK SKIN LABORATORY, DEPT. DA-6
206 Division Street, New York 2, N. Y.

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... Zone .....

State .....

Kindly send me one jar of Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and one jar of Viderm Skin Cleanser along with full, easy directions on how to use them. It is understood, the Viderm treatment is guaranteed and I must be delighted and pleased with it, in every way, or my money is to be cheerfully refunded. I will pay two dollars on delivery of everything.

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